



---

*Late in the night the only survivor of the encounter struggled into the anxious town and collapsed. After he was revived, he told his tale of their fight with the fierce and powerful wolf.*

*As the story rushed through town the wolf grew larger and more ferocious. Fear was in the eyes of everyone in Gubbio. Children were kept close by; weapons were at the ready and the defenses of the town were raised.*

---

## **Mediation Principles**

**I**n the previous chapter we focused on assessing how we typically respond to conflict. We asked ourselves who we become when we are faced with challenges and opposition. In this chapter we explore our perception of the other person in the conflict, the “antagonist” in our drama.

As we prepare to deliver our narrative account of what happened, we begin drafting a description of the villain who opposes us. While this character description may play well within our version of the story, if we wish to resolve the conflict we must verify the accuracy of our description. We must double-check our perceptions; we perform a “reality check” in which we unearth bias or error that taints our view of the other party.

## **tainted perceptions**

In order to perceive reality clearly we must recognize the subjective or emotional factors that color and distort our perceptions. We run a real risk of remaining hopelessly locked in a conflict as a result of false assumptions or false perceptions.

Often, as we look back at prior conflicts, we are haunted by regret. We recall the sickening feeling of knowing we have hurt another as a result of a rush to judgment that led us to act unwisely or unfairly. As much as we would like to avoid the truth, we recognize our flawed perceptions led us to hurt another.

We may have assumed the other party harbored evil motives and we may have taken punitive action in response, only to later discover our error. Sometimes we never discover the error but we live with uncertainty, unsure our actions were justified. If we are honest with ourselves we acknowledge there are troubling incidents such as these in our past. Reflecting on past errors, as unpleasant as that may be, helps us recognize how our perceptions of the other party fuel conflict.

Perhaps for the first time since the conflict began we take time to assess the accuracy of our assumptions and perceptions. This requires not only an open-minded curiosity about the other's story, but also a desire to assess the role our bias plays. It becomes clear that if our perceptions are heavily distorted we will not be able to listen accurately to the other party's story.

In the early stages of conflict resolution the mediator anticipates bias and poses questions that encourage a party to inspect their opinion of the opponent. Experience has taught the mediator an important lesson: if each party clings to radical misperceptions of the other party the process will come to a standstill. Thus, early in the process the mediator coaxes parties to explore and test their perceptions of their antagonist; the mediator guides parties through a "reality check" and listens closely to the narrative description of the adversary. Like a detective unraveling a mystery the mediator probes for supporting "evidence."

If a mediator is not yet involved, you will want to begin this "reality check" process on your own. Though it is extremely difficult

to overcome biased perception without assistance, you can begin the process of becoming more acutely aware of your perceptions.

During the actual mediation the mediator will attempt to remedy distortions that fuel conflict but at this early stage do not concentrate on changing your perceptions as much as correctly identifying your perceptions. Before we can change our views we first must identify exactly what it is we see. Like the author of a drama we must spend time polishing our description of the villain in the play. The following sections address that task.

### **false attributions**

Attribution Theory argues that people interpret the behavior of others by making assumptions regarding their motives.<sup>1</sup> When we observe another's behavior we imagine the inner narrative unfolding in that person's mind; we craft a story that explains *why* they did what they did. Based on those assumptions we construct our master narrative—the story we draft to make sense of events in our life—and we include the motives and intentions we ascribe to our antagonist.

As though we are writing a novel or memoir we create an imagined stream of consciousness for the other person, an inner narrative explaining *their* behavior in a way that allows *our* story to hang together. From our point of view other people become characters in the drama that is our life.

Attribution Theory argues that when we assign causes we select from two categories: the first category contains *dispositional* causes such as character, attitudes, intentions; the second category consists of *situational* causes in which behavior is motivated by external circumstances.<sup>2</sup> We tend to attribute the behavior of others to dispositional factors such as their character or intentions, while we attribute our own behavior to situational factors. This brings about *false attribution error*,<sup>3</sup> a bias in which we end up incorrectly attributing motive or disposition to another.

For example, when a car swerves in front of us on the freeway forcing us to brake suddenly, we likely assume the driver possesses a character flaw (“he is rude”) and we assume his intention was to

threaten our safety (“the fool was trying to kill us”). In our mind we were threatened by bad character and evil intention. On the other hand, when we swerve suddenly in front of another car we justify our behavior, assigning cause to situational factors such as lack of visibility, an imagined road hazard, or the poor handling qualities of our car. Or we simply admit we were distracted and claim “it is human to err.”

When parties assign blame they tend to excuse their behavior in the conflict as being forced on them by external circumstances beyond their control (situational causes) and they attribute the behavior of the other person to unworthy character or evil motives (dispositional causes). They grant themselves the benefit of a doubt based on an intimate knowledge of their subjective reality. They view their behavior in an understandable light, while seeing the behavior of the other party as arising out of evil motive or flawed character.

Stereotypes based on race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, and religion contribute to false attribution. The majority of people are not overtly prejudiced nor do they imagine they harbor prejudices, however, they often attribute the behavior of others to dispositional factors. When they script the other party’s inner story—a story of disposition, character, and intention—stereotypes seep into the analysis. Partial truths bolster the imagined inner story we create.

For example, cultural stereotypes are frequently used for positive purposes, as when we prepare for important cross-cultural interactions, such as conducting business in another country; in such instances, we study the idiosyncrasies of the other culture in an effort to be conscientious and to understand what pleases a member of that culture. We attempt to understand the types of behavior they view as appropriate.

Such stereotypes, however, have limited utility along with potential downside. Applied without caution and discernment they produce false attribution error in which a party, consciously or unconsciously, writes the other party’s inner story using stereotypical assumptions.

The visiting executive assumes his counterpart from another culture will think or act in a certain fashion dictated by his culturally motivated character. While the assumptions may be correct in many situations, at other times they are wrong and possibly insulting because they neglect individual character and interests. In similar situations

during conflict resolution we must consider the unique individual in front of us and use extraordinary caution when we construct an imagined inner story based on a “culturally appropriate” attribution of motives, intention, or character.

For example, a young woman may assume the older Caucasian male boss with whom she is in conflict clings blindly to extreme conservative values. She may assume he disapproves of the work she has done in organizing a generous contribution of company funds to a non-profit agency that provides aid to the poor in a third world country. When he calls her into his office to discuss her actions she fabricates a “stream of consciousness” narrative for the boss—in the imagined story he berates her for using company funds to assist those who show a lack of motivation in helping themselves.

Based on this imagined and anticipated story she steps forward with what she considers to be a heroic posture and launches into a tirade, attacking the boss and dismissing him as shallow, callous, and lacking in moral insight. The boss fires her on the spot. Only later does she discover the boss is a major contributor to an international agency that funds micro-loans for women starting businesses in developing countries. His complaint, which she never heard, was that she organized the contribution in a manner inconsistent with accepted accounting procedures.

As a result of false attribution she turned age, gender, and class stereotypes into a flawed inner narrative for the boss, a narrative that led to the termination of her employment. While this example assumes a significant lack of prior communication between the two adversaries it is not entirely unrealistic. Often there is poor communication in organizations and we operate largely on assumptions. We commit the same types of error, mostly in more subtle ways.

In most cases we do not recognize we are working on the basis of assumptions we have written into assumed inner narratives. We fail to be truly mindful of our internal storytelling. We assume our perception is aligned with reality “out there”; but often the reality we assume exists occurs only in our story. During conflict resolution we are forced to realize that reality also includes the other person’s narrative. To the extent that we fail to leave the door open for the other party to enrich our version of reality we manufacture barriers to resolution.

False attributions can be difficult to detect and even tougher to correct as they tend to be on-the-fly assessments of the other party that settle into our consciousness. When a mediator first listens to a party's story of "what happened" she is wise to guard against uncritical acceptance of false attribution. I am constantly amazed at the degree to which the first account I hear in a session leaves me convinced I have heard an incontrovertible truth. Then I listen to the second party who has an equally convincing and compelling account of events that contradicts the first account.

In both instances the party holds a rock-solid certainty regarding the facts of the case—from their point of view. These contrary accounts cannot both be factual, yet they are both true to the individual who experienced them. The mediator does not seek to adjudicate one reality over another but rather acknowledges the truth of both accounts, as seen from the perspective of each individual. The task the mediator faces is helping re-craft the narratives into an acceptable shared truth.

But rewriting is difficult. Once assigned, imagined character flaws and evil intentions become difficult to erase from our minds. We unconsciously search for evidence to verify the story we have created and we are usually able to cobble together sufficient supporting details to make our story work.

The challenge is to motivate parties to rewrite their narratives—to alter their narratives just enough to create a basis for the parties to co-author a new narrative of the future. In order to facilitate this delicate rewriting task a mediator may mimic Columbo, the disarming, beguilingly naïve, and deceptively inquisitive television detective played by Peter Falk. Playing the bumbling detective, the mediator poses slightly oblique but probing questions that inspire a party to view the opposing party as a mystery to be solved rather than as a cardboard character to be propped up.

### **overcoming false attributions**

How do we check our assumptions regarding the other party's evil intentions? In some cases we falsely attribute evil intentions when such intentions do not exist; in other cases we assume evil intentions do not exist, when in fact they do. In the former case, we erect an arbitrary

barrier; in the latter case, we blithely open a door to those who intend harm. We can error in either direction.

As a result, we run into a dichotomy between relationship-destroying paranoia and self-destructive glibness, causing us to vacillate between unwarranted fear and hopeful naiveté. In the conflict resolution process we learn to discern between erroneously demonizing the other party and genuinely unmasking a demon. We approach the other party with healthy skepticism, as a mystery to be solved; we accept we might not know all there is to know about them. We enter the process with a healthy dose of curiosity, a sense of discovery, and openness to unexpected revelations.

In order to unravel the mystery of our antagonist we need a process that differentiates actual evil intentions from false attribution of evil. That process is mediation: a process in which parties revisit and re-examine events; work through varying (and sometimes contradictory) accounts of what happened; and share explanations—“why things happened the way they did”—that provide the missing inner story.

In mediation we overcome our inability “to get inside the other’s head” by sharing views and concerns. We gather information about self and the other and overcome the barrier of false attribution. A bridge is established that allows careful, gradual, and comprehensive exploration of each party’s worldview. In response to our gentle probing, our antagonist fills in the blanks in our story; in response to the other party’s questions, we fill in the blanks in their narrative.

When we listen to the other party’s inner story we acquire the material needed to rewrite our master narrative, especially sections of the narrative we scripted about the other party. Likewise we take the opportunity to provide answers the other party will need in order to reconstruct their narrative of our behavior from their perspective.

Initially we may be reticent to share our inner life, our motives, intentions, and feelings, but with experience we begin to understand the importance of co-authoring a new narrative with our antagonist. In some cases, even while we still doubt that we will achieve a positive resolution, we begin to take an interest in knowing all that we can about the other party, so that even in the face of an adverse outcome we can better understand what happened.

## emotional subjectivity

Our subjective world is colored by emotions; we see the world through emotional lenses. Our moods and temperament orchestrate the drama that is our life. In recent times, “objective truth” based on “material facts” has become honored as an ideal, often causing us to dismiss our subjective awareness and our feelings as unreliably emotional. For some, emotions have taken on a negative connotation; emotions are considered an arbitrary variable that foils our best rational intentions.

The elevation of “the objective” to sanctified status, however, lacks merit. The assumption that “the objective” trumps subjective awareness creates distorted expectations, as *all* events are observed through the filter of consciousness. It is impossible for us to truly know “the objective” world, as our only window on the world is exclusively subjective. For all we know there is no objective world that stands separate from and independent of our conscious awareness.

At a fundamental level what we call reality turns out to be a function of our subjective awareness. We cannot divorce “objective reality” from our subjective perceptions as though that reality stands as an absolute that can be known. Rather, that which we call the objective is actually the inter-subjective; what we call “objective” is simply that which we can observe (subjectively) in unison.

My conscious subjective observation and your conscious subjective observation come together to form an inter-subjective agreement. We reach subjective agreement regarding the nature of that which we view. When we seek the objective we actually come together to perform a subjective “reality check.” This lends validity to the dynamic process of bringing parties together to craft a common narrative, for that is ultimately the way we manufacture “reality.”

Thus, conflict resolution does not call for us to banish subjectivity but rather to understand the subjective lenses through which we view life and to work to correct distortions. Rather than shun emotions and subjectivity we embrace them as elements of the collaborative process.

Mediators realize emotional subjectivity plays a central role in the conflict and that no conflict is devoid of emotional factors; they realize destructive emotions play a critical role in conflict. The authors of *Difficult Conversations* note, “Each side must have their feelings

*acknowledged...* Acknowledgment is a step that simply cannot be skipped.<sup>24</sup> We cannot proceed to the problem-solving stage of the process while feelings remain unacknowledged.

One reason acknowledgment is vital is that feelings are strongly tied to our view of what constitutes reality. When we do not acknowledge our opponent's feelings we imply our opponent is not lined up with reality; in denying our opponent's feelings we refuse to ratify that which is real for them. In response they shut down and refuse to move ahead.

An acknowledgment does not necessarily mean we *agree* with their reality, but it does say we *recognize* what constitutes reality *for them*. When we listen and inquire into their perspectives we send a signal that we are not out to undermine their sense of what is real. Instead, we signal that we sincerely want to know how they have come to see the world as they do. Later in the process we may collaboratively rewrite the shared narrative account of reality but first we must signal that we recognize the existing reality in which they live.

### **destructive emotions**

As we unravel feelings related to the conflict we usually discover the primary destructive emotion at work is fear. We then face the daunting challenge of defining and describing our fear, an emotion that usually serves to protect us from experiencing adverse consequences. Our fear typically protects us from danger but now we are being asked to "sit with" our fear, which typically causes discomfort.

When it comes to handling fear, a mediator often asks us to engage in moments of mindfulness, periods of self-awareness. Rather than dismiss or avoid fear and its discomfort we embrace fear as a window on the conflict. With the mediator facilitating, we gaze through this emotional window and begin, perhaps for the first time, to understand the struggle in which we are engaged.

As we explore the nature of fear we find it usually reflects our desire to avoid adverse consequences. Following this logic, we ask ourselves what adverse consequences cause us concern. Consequences might include failing to procure something we desire, losing something we value dearly, or being forced to endure pain. Adverse consequences

often involve loss of physical possessions, loss of one's body, of Face, of freedom. The be/do/have model we used earlier highlights consequences over which we commonly worry. In our assessment, we identify the fears and adverse consequences at work.

When we scrutinize our perceptions of our antagonist we identify fears regarding "what they will do to us." What consequences will they inflict on us if we do not act as they wish or as they demand? What harm will they make us suffer? What things that we hold dear will they take from us? What abhorrent conditions will they force upon us?

As our view of the opposing party can be expressed in terms of adverse consequences, exploring the consequences we wish to avoid clarifies our vision of the person with whom we are in conflict. Our fears define our antagonist; he or she is the character in our drama who will render us bankrupt, remove us from our job, take custody of our children, or cause us to suffer physical pain.

Two additional primary destructive emotions are anger and rage. With fear we anticipate consequences we will suffer at the hands of another, with anger and rage we anticipate adverse consequences we intend to exact on another. Fear speaks to how we will be harmed; anger and rage speak to how we will deliver harm. Just as we assessed fear we now assess the conditions that trigger anger or rage. When we move behind the curtain of blinding emotion what do we find? What does the *wolf* look like?

In our earlier discussion we established the idea that conflict arises from two opposing forces hopelessly locked together. Conditions have arisen in which we cannot or will not turn away and the other party cannot or will not turn away. Neither party will cease their attempts to move in a direction that opposes the motion of the other party. When we find ourselves locked in this oppositional embrace from which we are unable to escape it appears there is nothing left for us to do but rid ourselves of the other person, using violent means if necessary. The oppositional embrace generates a "need-to-destroy" that manifests as anger and rage.

A common though perhaps trivial example is the young child who sets his sights on going outside to play despite his unfinished dinner. His mother blocks his path and the oppositional "embrace" takes shape. The child, in his own mind, is unable to retreat yet his path is

blocked; as a result of two opposing intentions colliding (and releasing emotion) he explodes into a tantrum. The more he fights, the more resolute his mother becomes in opposition.

From a distance we recognize both parties have options: there are other ways they can handle the situation and in most cases, as the child matures and the parent gains experience, they find other ways of meeting their needs. As an example, however, this scenario illustrates a mild instance in which parties become locked in an oppositional embrace; “feeling stopped” generates negative emotion that turns to rage. In extreme cases, destruction of the other party takes precedence over our own survival. When we describe how we perceive the other party, we can uncover the factors that trigger our destructive instincts; we can learn to identify the forces that lock us in opposition.

### **negative emotions hamper reconciliation**

Fear motivates “wall building”—we build walls to protect ourselves. Anger and rage motivate us to build walls that “keep us in”; we build walls that restrain us from acting out our hostile intentions. As we review the history of destructive emotions that have arisen during a conflict, we discover the walls we have built to protect ourselves from others and we discover the walls we have built to protect others from us. Previously, we may not have fully understood the ways we protect ourselves; our defenses may have been invisible to us.

While being without walls can be dangerous when a real threat exists, an equal danger exists in building walls that trap us within. We build defenses to repel intruders, but those defenses leave us secluded and disconnected. We build walls the other party must destroy in order to reach us, while the other party builds walls we must destroy in order to reach them. The walls become impediments to relationship and they close down emotional rapport; they enforce separation.

When we are locked in conflict and cut off from relationship frustration builds. A desire to knock down the other party’s walls surfaces; we want them to be able to see us, to hear us, to know we exist, to know we have needs, to know we suffer. The other party’s defenses, paradoxically, become an affront to us that provokes our attack—the exact outcome the wall was constructed to prevent. When our needs

are frustrated we vow to tear down the wall with force. Our attack threatens the other party who responds by reinforcing their defenses.

In the continuing cycle of attack and defend that leads to ongoing construction of defensive walls, those walls keep us apart, prevent resolution, and result in conflict escalation. Careful analysis allows us to begin to grasp how our defenses provoke attacks by the other party, which, in turn, motivate us to construct additional defenses. A rational approach calls for balance: we build walls needed for safety and destroy walls that serve no purpose. As we enter into conflict resolution, we find a dual need to assess required defenses while removing barricades that prevent establishment of relationship and communication. If we are to reconcile we must build bridges rather than walls.

The mediator, working with the parties, facilitates the transformation of walls into bridges, finding creative and unique ways to dismantle defenses. We do not tear down all protections and leave ourselves completely exposed; rather, we collaborate with the other party in identifying and removing walls that block a resolution that would benefit both parties. A twofold operation takes place: mediation guidelines maintain safety while increased communication brings parties closer together. The parties take measured steps toward each other while their safety, physical and emotional, is insured by process guidelines.

### **scarcity creates conflict**

A special case of false attribution arises in situations of real or imagined scarcity. A fear that others will seize scarce goods we need colors our perceptions, resulting in a zero sum game: another's win is seen as our loss. When we are faced with perceived scarcity, everyone takes on the color of a potential enemy. We become compulsively jealous and possessive; we cling; we hoard; we engage in conflict behavior.

Social Darwinism, an insidious philosophy, based on a view of scarcity that postulated a fierce struggle for "survival of the fittest," was a philosophical, political, and economic model that pitted each individual against all others, promoting an extreme win-lose view of the world. The carnage of the last century provides evidence of the harm such a philosophy of scarcity unleashes. When we become more

acutely aware of human interdependence we tend to seek more positive and compassionate views of life.

The pressing need for global civilization to find a better path through our collective desert of hate, envy, and war—a need St. Francis envisioned centuries ago—demands a more enlightened philosophy and wider recognition within society of conflict resolution principles.

When Ian Morgan Cron compared the age in which Francis lived with the age in which we live, he concluded one remedy for today's social ills is the promulgation of Franciscan theology that can guide us in our effort to live in compassionate relationship with one another.<sup>5</sup> In Francis we find a charismatic saint who did not accept the idea scarcity was an inevitable cause for irremediable strife; instead he saw scarcity as a call to compassionate action.

At the same time he recognized and celebrated the bounty of Divine creation, he recognized and combated Mankind's tendency toward clinging and attachment. He was acutely aware of the role that imagined and real scarcity played in conflict. It is no coincidence that he was known as a peacemaker and, at the same time, chose a life of poverty as a way to teach the pitfalls of clinging and attachment. For Francis the solution to conflict over scarcity was to always place relationship first; in concentrating on loving and compassionate relationships we find the solutions to scarcity, especially imagined or manufactured scarcity.

When the problem of scarcity arises within the conflict resolution process the mediator assists parties in their investigation of whether or not the perceived scarcity is real or apparent, authentic or manufactured. Parties often come to the table with a "fixed pie" view of the world based on an apparent scarcity; with the help of a mediator they learn to "expand the pie" in a way that utilizes scarce resources to meet everyone's needs.<sup>6</sup>

In many conflicts there has been a lack of creativity when it comes to utilization of resources; in other instances a false or inauthentic scarcity must be unmasked. In some cases we find philosophies such as Social Darwinism promote views that fix attention on scarcity and create false anxiety that leads to conflict over imagined or manufactured scarcity. As we analyze conflict we have a need to assess our assumptions and perceptions regarding scarcity.

## catharsis

At the outset of mediation it is not uncommon to find parties “locked up” emotionally, hesitant to unleash negative emotions. They harbor a fear that the other party will express negative emotions that will cause them discomfort. As a result, an unnatural “truce” takes place in which the parties decline to engage honestly with one another; they tacitly agree to keep their feelings bottled up and proceed as though it were possible to skirt difficult emotions and move directly to rational problem solving.

The unexpressed emotions, however, typically slow or stall the process and alter perceptions. A party cannot view the other party accurately through a filter of unsettled emotion; distortion is the inevitable result. False attributions that emerge from unacknowledged negative emotion prevent problem solving.

For this reason, mediators recognize it is vital to encourage a party to release pent-up emotions in a controlled manner. However, they may encounter continuing apprehension: parties may worry the release of negative emotions will produce discomfort and ruin the relationship or even instigate violence. A double bind emerges: in the absence of emotional release the parties will not move forward, yet they resist emotional release as they fear the result will be unpleasant.

At this point we seek creative ways of purging the negative emotions of anger, rage, jealousy, and fear. We seek catharsis—the cleansing of troublesome emotion—without provoking overt hostility or violence. Mediation seeks to transform negative emotions from impediments into materials used to build bridges. The mediator attempts to “turn lead into gold.”

Often this undertaking is accomplished in private sessions during which the mediator serves as a safe and empathetic listener able to field negative emotions without responding reactively. In such settings the process of unearthing, purging, and transforming negative emotions is facilitated. In *Difficult Conversations* this aspect of conflict resolution is called the “feelings conversation.”<sup>7</sup>

When we engage difficult emotions it is important to keep in mind that *mediation is not therapy, yet it is therapeutic*. On the other hand

there is a tendency in our culture to sequester emotional discourse as though it were pathology to be addressed exclusively by a mental health professional. Emotions that come to view in conflict resolution, however, are not signs of pathology but rather a natural component of a healthy life. The authors of *Difficult Conversations* note, “The problem is that when feelings are at the heart of what’s going on, they *are* the business at hand and ignoring them is nearly impossible.”<sup>8</sup> When we come into conflict with another person destructive emotions will be present—it is part of the conflict landscape.

Perhaps one reason we find conflict resolution so difficult is that we find negative emotions difficult—in our culture we have become less adept at managing destructive emotions. Because of this failure to manage our emotions we tend to arrive at false perceptions of others and are prone to false attribution. The mediator guides parties through these emotional challenges; nonetheless, a party has an obligation to begin work on managing destructive emotions on their own prior to mediation.

The scope of emotional catharsis experienced upon release of destructive emotions increases significantly when the process includes spiritual transformation. When we approach conflict as an opportunity for spiritual transformation we address emotions and their origins at the deepest level. Our focus shifts to the very nature of emotions and our ability to feel not only our own distress and suffering but also the suffering of others. The manner in which emotions define relationships with others and a relationship with the divine rises to the foreground in our contemplation. Focus shifts from mere release of negative emotions to a deep understanding of their nature and origin and our vulnerability to their power.

Francis provided one model for such a transformation—his intense and devoted contemplation of Christ suffering on the cross transformed him into a saint revered for his loving embrace of others, even lepers who previously caused him revulsion and fear. His approach offers a glimpse at one possible solution to the dilemma.

When Francis contemplated the broken and suffering Christ he came to know in a profound manner the horrible consequences we can exact upon another. He may have found peace in knowing that

he was also subject to adverse consequences, while at the same time realizing those consequences are placed in proper perspective by the Resurrection. Francis ceased attachment to that which was transient and fleeting in order to embrace that which was everlasting and supreme—his relationship with the Divine.

Francis followed this contemplative path to inner peace and gained an ability to greet others with unconditional love. Along the way he lost his fear of being stripped of possessions; in fact, he greeted poverty with open arms. He lost his fear of losing status; he embraced humility. He embraced those who might hurt him rather than brandishing a curled fist. Letting go of fear, anger, rage, and self-pity, he opened doors to loving-kindness and the rich rewards of relationship.

When he managed his emotions he came to see others in a more profoundly accurate light—he saw them as creatures endowed with a divine nature. His was not a naïve or trivial path; Franciscan brothers were martyred, facing mortal danger with the open arms of love. Francis' example may not be something we can achieve or even something to which we can aspire. However, understanding his life may help us modify our views.

His example may motivate us to release destructive emotions—fear, anger, rage, and self-pity. When we gain insight into our emotions as Francis did, we begin to imagine what it would be like “to love our enemies.” The tendency to demonize the other party with false attributions gives way to empathy that inspires us to be open to understanding our opponent's inner narrative. We might even ask ourselves how the divine might speak to our heart through the other party's story.

At this stage in the conflict resolution process it is too early to call on a party to summon unconditional love, nonetheless, Christ's teaching is mentioned in order to foreshadow our destination once we have released our clinging to destructive emotions and cleared away obfuscations that alter our view of the other.

### **confronting evil**

In order to approach conflict resolution with steady poise and a clear eye we must be certain of our ability to confront and transform

evil. When we are called upon to confront evil we often experience an overwhelming desire to run, to escape through avoidance. Contemplative or spiritually transformative mediation provides the advantage of tapping into the resources of the indwelling Spirit and when spiritual resources—reflection, contemplation, and prayer—are brought to bear on conflict, they shore up our ability to confront evil. As we experience spiritual transformation we discover new strength and a newfound willingness to face adversity.

Frequently, however, we vacillate when it comes to the opposition: are they actually evil or is our fear of evil clouding our impressions? This uncertainty exacerbates conflict and delays resolution. We seem unable to cut through our antagonist's smokescreens, unable to hurdle their defenses, and at the same time we feel unable to plumb the depths of our own misperceptions. We stumble into shadowy terrain that defeats clarity and certainty.

While it makes sense to move closer to the *wolf* where we can make a more informed evaluation, we do not consider the move worth the added danger. Attributing evil to the other person becomes a strategic (though often unconscious) decision. We settle on a "safe" solution: we attack the other party and protect ourselves. Fear of evil muddies our perception and the *wolf* grows ferocious in our mind's eye. It becomes "obvious" that we should not risk being hurt or defeated; therefore, survival instincts trump caution—we decide it is better to actively protect against possible evil than risk lowering our guard.

While we may know mediation has been designed to overcome the challenge of fear-driven reactions, we might not possess the courage or clarity of mind to engage in mediation. Though conflict resolution tools exist, we may fear using them. When we encounter this dilemma, spiritual resources can make a significant difference, giving us the courage to embrace the other person and confront evil (should that turn out to be the actual situation).

Paradoxically, when we no longer doubt our ability to confront evil we frequently discover we have falsely attributed evil where none exists. We discover our fear of evil has morphed mere shadows into a threatening reality. Once we engage in mediation we "slow the process down" to take a closer look at our fears, gaining the reward of

additional clarity that comes with integrating spiritual resources into the process.

The residents of Gubbio had good reason to be afraid: the *wolf* had killed family and friends. The destructive emotion of fear that arose out of their suffering prevented the townspeople from analyzing all options. Though fear was justified it generated a destructive response that failed to improve the situation. Though the *wolf* had killed, a closer investigation of the type Francis was about to undertake would reveal the citizens of Gubbio were not dealing with actual evil but rather they were dealing with fear and anger that prompted new attempts to kill the *wolf*.

It took a saint employing spiritual resources to change the dynamic. Francis' mediation between the *wolf* and Gubbio took place in "the external world" as do most of our conflicts, but at the same time, we can imagine a spiritual force at work mediating and transforming inner worlds, bringing about change. When conflict obscures awareness and perceptions and hardens hearts it is often the subtle inner changes, such as the Spirit moving inside, that advance forward, past the barrier of fear of evil.

### **understanding why we see the other as we do**

What is there in our perceptions of the other person that fuels fear, anger, jealousy, suspicion, and hatred? In an attempt to break the cycle of escalation we need to be aware of factors that cause us to target the other as an evil agent. Self-analysis prompts in the journal workbook explore why we see the other as we do and motivate us to check our perceptions for accuracy.

The spiritually transformative party places an emphasis on self-assessment, self-analysis, and contemplation as tools used to monitor perceptual distortion that prevents us from seeing the other party as they actually are. When we recognize we are hauling emotional and perceptual baggage we begin to appreciate the value of contemplative prayer or mindfulness as practices that provide the strength necessary to overcome fear, anger, rage, and other destructive emotions.

---

## A Franciscan View

As we discuss perceptions colored or distorted by emotion we are reminded that Francis honored the divine essence of all creatures. In other people he perceived the potential for heaven to come to earth. When Francis looked at another person the power of the Holy Spirit inspired him to peer beneath the surface and penetrate the false images of mundane identity. He pierced through stereotypes to draw out the best in those he met.

Francis instructed his Brothers, “Follow the Holy Spirit and His holy manner of working.”<sup>9</sup> It is safe to assume he realized in his own heart that it was the Holy Spirit of Pentecost that enabled him to probe beneath the surface and behold the human heart, the home of God. In *Franciscan Prayer*, Ilia Delio references St. Bonaventure on this topic: “We cannot love the God we cannot see unless we love the God we see within ourselves and in others. The more we are able to find God within ourselves, the more we can find God outside ourselves.”<sup>10</sup>

Francis knew well the sting of false attributions: he was accused of being a fanatic, of being deluded, of being a naïve man. From his point of view, however, he was not deluded or a fanatic, but rather realized “that he could not be free until he held nothing back from the Fire of God’s Eternal Love. As a result he entered into the Abyss of Love in his experience on Mt. La Verna where he was granted the imprint of the sacred Wounds of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

The qualities that others attributed to Francis differed greatly from the inner reality Francis experienced; these false attributions failed to capture the life he lived. We can imagine how difficult it would be for an outsider to “write the inner narrative” of a man like St. Francis. They would be forced to imagine an inner state with which they had little or no experience. Francis became acutely aware of this problem of bias and prejudice and as a result taught the Brothers to be tolerant and forgiving in all their relations with others.

When destructive emotions made an appearance, Francis was also there to instruct the friars. He would turn to Scripture and encourage the friars not to lose hope. “The Word, he believed, was hidden in the folds of every brother’s heart. The Word to Francis was a royal carpet that led to the Father. The Word was a rope that could reach down into the deepest pit of despair in a friar’s consciousness. The Word was a lamp unto the feet of Francis.”<sup>12</sup> Francis knew firsthand that there was a way to be lifted up beyond the destructive weaknesses of the human heart and this made him an effective peacemaker.

We can imagine that when Francis looked upon the citizens of Gubbio, he recognized their need for safety and protection. He felt their loss and grieved. But then he was energized to do the unthinkable—to pay a visit to the perpetrator. Perhaps he intuited that understanding the pain of our worst enemy allows us to embrace them. Francis’ boldness could certainly be seen in his resolute decision to accept personal risk by seeking out the *wolf*. Francis went forth to meet the *wolf* believing The Holy Spirit possessed the power to transform fear into courage.

---

## Scripture

*Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*

— 1 Peter 2:1-2

*He said to them, “Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?” Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. The men were amazed, and said, “What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”*

— Matthew 8:26-27

*“Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

— Matthew 10:26-28

*“When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”*

— Luke 12:11

*Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.*

— 1 Peter 1:22-23

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil, for You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You have anointed my head with oil;  
My cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days  
of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

— Psalm 23:4-6

