



E L E V E N

The wolf froze in mid step, struggling with doubt and uncertainty. Finally, understanding that Francis meant him no harm, the wolf inched closer to Francis and then sat back on his haunches, ready to listen.

Francis told the wolf that he had come from Gubbio and then described what the townspeople were experiencing because of the wolf's actions. He described the pain and resentment they held toward the wolf.

"How did this come to happen?" Francis asked the wolf. "Why did you kill the livestock and people?"

Mediation Principles

Francis makes contact with the *wolf* and asks, "How did this come to happen?" The other side—the *wolf* in this case—has a chance to tell his story. In previous chapters, we covered the importance of narratives and allowing parties to search for a shared solution to their conflict. In this chapter, we will briefly review material presented previously that bears repeating and we will take up new concepts that apply to the party who has been less willing to convene.

creative use of narrative

Asking the open-ended question “what happened?” invites a party to provide a narrative description of events—the story told from their point of view. The question is non-evaluative in nature; the mediator becomes an interested listener rather than a judge. Such open-ended questions do not guide a party toward specific details, but rather allow the party to disclose the conflict history as they choose, selectively placing importance on events from their perspective.

This approach elicits a heartfelt and personal view of what occurred. While it may not be considered important in a court of law, it is very important in mediation. When a mediator fails to allow a party to present his or her story in the manner in which they choose, he risks entering bias into the process. His questions, if too narrow, steer the conversation in particular directions altering focus and content. Francis avoids steering the conversation with the *wolf* in a preconceived direction; he sits quietly, listens with empathy, and takes in the story *as it is told*.

In most cultures, we use storytelling to convey complex information within the context of our emotional stream of consciousness. As noted previously, rules of evidence in a court limit the personal narrative in an attempt to get at “facts” stripped of emotion. In an adjudicative process in which a judge, jury, or arbitrator must make a decision within a limited time period, stripped down “facts” are often useful.

Thus, if you are involved in a dispute that has reached the courts, your attorney or representative will limit your narrative. Their questions will focus on preparing for trial with the “pertinent facts”; they will seek to meet strategic legal or rhetorical goals. Once their focus takes over, the story you tell is designed to meet the strategic needs of the adversarial process. This shift may be so subtle you do not detect the change at first; you simply answer questions put forth by your attorney and assist him in building a case.

More than a few times I have encountered the situation in which, once I hear the unedited narrative of “what happened,” I realize the conflict differs from the conflict presented by the attorney in opening remarks. While the attorney believed the conflict revolved around Issue

A (for which he prepared a legal argument), the real conflict had to do with Issue B, revealed only in mediation. Attorneys' bewilderment upon finding out for the first time what the conflict was *really* about has been mildly amusing for me. This misstep occurs when insufficient time has been spent allowing the party to relate the story of what happened in their own words with their own focus.

As you prepare for conflict resolution, you can avoid this dilemma by using the *Taming the Wolf* prompts to prepare for mediation; they call forth a richer tapestry of emotions, perspectives, and meaning. This will allow you to take advantage of the opportunity to tell your story in a manner you prefer.

When we create our spoken or written narratives, we typically see ourselves as heroes on an epic journey. We are the hero of our own story—perhaps a beleaguered hero, but a hero nonetheless. How we conceive our heroic character shapes our story. When we tell our story in our own words, we enter a special world rich with meaning and significance.

It is here, in the first-person perspective, that decisions regarding resolution and reconciliation must be fashioned. If a decision does not make sense within the context of our inner narrative, we will not achieve a durable resolution. In simpler terms, we must be able to integrate a potential outcome into our personal inner story before we can accept it. If we do not see how our character plays a role in the future drama, if the new story proposed for the future does not make sense or does not appeal to us, we reject it.

For example, if I perceive myself as a virtuous character who took action in an attempt to remedy a dangerous situation, I will not accept an outcome in which I am pictured as a villain who wantonly caused harm. A resolution will not occur in the face of a story that contradicts the heroic character I see myself to be. On the other hand, I can accept a new narrative in which I am a well-intentioned character who received bad information and acted on that faulty information, and as a result accidentally caused harm for which I now apologize (as I am well-intentioned). Thus the story that evolves must be consistent with our overall inner narrative and must be acceptable to our larger "audience" of stakeholders viewing our moment on stage.

Rarely will the story that one party narrates match the story the other party tells. The challenge is to help parties write overlapping narratives regarding the future. In many cases, the most a mediator can hope for with regards to the past narrative is that parties accept that they each viewed events from different perspectives. To achieve resolution they accept the idea that the difference in narratives of the past is irrelevant to the future.

In other words, the process calls for a ceasefire when it comes to arguing over which narrative of the past shall prevail as the official truth. A skilled mediator inspires parties to take a genuine interest in the other party's story and helps them see that that story, although it is not their story, is valid for the other person. When a party understands that listening to the other party's story will help them achieve resolution, they listen more closely, searching for clues that reveal the other person. They come to know the character starring in the other person's drama.

In most conflicts one or both parties do not really know the person with whom they have become entangled. The parties may be relatives or spouses but they do not truly know the other person, *as they exist in their inner drama*. They have never had the opportunity to listen closely to the inner narrative. When they come to realize their only hope for progress lies in understanding the motivations and interests of the other person (so that they can satisfy those interests) they listen at a deeper level to that which is not obvious, that which rarely comes into the light. It helps if they consider the other's story to be a mystery from which they must extract vital clues that lead to the dramatic ending—reconciliation.

Mythmaking plays a central role in this narrative process. This idea might arouse skepticism as in the midst of a conflict we seek simple truths; a myth would seem to be the last thing we desire. However, we all live within a myth of our own creation: we see ourselves as a heroic character on a life journey. We conceive ourselves to be struggling with trials and tribulations that test our character as we travel on our life journey.

Most of the time we remain unaware of the subtle mythmaking that colors our lived experience. Only when we summon this script

from our unconscious and explore our personal heroic journey does its influence come into focus.¹ Then we discover that we constantly compose myths that inform the central stories of our lives.² We begin to ask, what role does conflict play in these stories? How do the heroes in our stories address conflict?

While the mediator may help the parties rewrite the narrative surrounding the conflict, a party must be mindful that this singular conflict “episode” takes place within a larger narrative myth that guides them through their life journey. As you work with the prompts, place the specific conflict you are trying to resolve within the context of your mythic life journey.

In the dramatic stage play, the question of how one overcomes opposition to arrive at a new equilibrium is the central spring or energy driving the drama. In conflict resolution a similar dynamic is at work: the central question we face is how we will overcome our opposition and resolve the conflict in order to establish a new state of equilibrium in our life.

Unfortunately, though we can learn from the parallels in drama, too many film dramas provide unreasoned approaches to resolving conflict; instead, they present violent and coercive solutions. A challenge for all peacemakers is overcoming the influence of popular culture on conflict resolution behavior, and the challenge the individual party faces is becoming aware of cultural influences that provide less-than-optimum choices for our personal dramas.

Our culture is inundated with role models who resolve conflicts with violent force; these solutions make for exciting action films with magnificent effects, but they fail to represent options that will bring about a culture of peace. Too often these cultural influences seep into our consciousness. Those who lack experience with reasoned choice and peaceful resolution—often the younger members of society—may harbor the view that violent means are required to resolve conflict. In contrast, the mediator helps parties create new myths, new roles, new heroic characters, and new narratives that produce optimum non-violent outcomes.

Once open-ended questions prompt a narrative, the mediator employs clarifying questions to insure he has an accurate picture of

what occurred. He gathers important details that help him flesh out the story. Using clarifying questions, he explores portions of the narrative that may not have been clear in the first telling.

When I introduce mediation to new clients, I alert them at the outset that I may ask questions to clarify that which I did not understand fully; I explain they should not consider these questions to be a challenge or a cross-examination, but rather an inquiry that comes from a desire to understand. Without this warning they may unconsciously consider my questions to be a challenge and they become defensive. Judge Alexander Williams III, with whom I participated in settlement conferences, often said to parties, “You are the experts. I will never understand your case as well as you do.”³ He characterized clarifying questions as inquiry posed to the experts on the dispute—the parties themselves.

After clarifying major points that were previously unclear the mediator narrows the inquiry to close-ended questions, which are often answered with “yes” or “no” responses or with specific factual information. As noted in an earlier chapter, the mediator’s questions can be graphed as a “funnel”: they begin with broad open-ended questions then narrow as the mediator attempts to understand the conflict in detail. Your challenge as a party is to be as transparent as possible during this process, allowing the mediator to walk in your shoes and see the conflict through your eyes.

As the mediator listens he comes to understand the perceptions on which you rely. You may rely primarily on sight, hearing, or feeling. Knowing how you tend to perceive helps him understand how you might best engage with the process of recalling events. Some people rely on visuals, describing events in terms of how it *looked* to them. They might use language that says, “This is how it looks to me.” Others rely on auditory cues describing what was said or how it *sounded*, “This is how it sounds to me.” Or they may describe events in terms of how they felt, “This is how I felt about it.”

Some describe events in linear, chronological narratives, while others move freely between the past and the present, ordering events according to variables other than time. Typically, we are not aware that we perceive the world in unique ways and that we approach time differently; we assume we experience like everyone else. When we

discover others perceive events in ways we may not have considered, we open new doors of perception.

In order to “slip into your skin” the mediator may vary his questions to access different ways of viewing past events. He may ask you to view in ways that are new to you. How does this *sound*? How does this *feel*? How does this *look*? These are some of the most obvious ways of varying questions so as to prompt recall.

You can become creative in tapping your perceptions; you can vary the point of view you use to recall events; you can recall events as you saw them and then imagine the same events from the point of view of the other party, then from the view of a witness or bystander. As you work with the prompts, vary the approach and access conflict-related events with a variety of perceptions. The more viewpoints you can bring to your recall of past events, the more clarity and flexibility you may achieve in your understanding of the conflict.

impressions

In Gubbio, Francis asked the mayor questions regarding how the townspeople viewed the *wolf*. In such preliminary meetings the mediator pays close attention to how parties perceive one another. These impressions are colored by emotions, values, biases, history, and prejudices, so while the mediator needs the information in order to understand the conflict, she must also resist forming opinions and instead remain outside the conflict in a neutral or impartial posture.

When I first began mediating, one lesson I learned was just how profoundly the first party’s account can cause one to prematurely misjudge the second party. I might hear a very convincing, cogent, and reasonable narrative from the first party: they would paint a detailed (and often unflattering) picture of the opposing party. On my way to meet with the other party, I had the sense that I knew what to expect; I had met people like this before.

Then, inevitably, upon meeting the other party I would be startled by what I found: they were not what I expected. Preconceptions spawned by the first party’s narrative would take a beating. The second party’s story painted a different, but equally cogent, picture of events.

The experience drove home the lesson that we all see the world from a very personal, subjective viewpoint.

This does not mean we give up and do not listen and it does not mean each party's view lacks veracity. There is always a modicum of truth in what has been said. The perception each party has of the other is real; it is how they see the other person and we must not disregard that vision. It is where we start. But we do not get locked into a static or fixed view—particularly one informed by our first impressions.

When you begin mediation it is worthwhile to note how rigid your view of the other party may have become and how rigid the other party's view of you has become. It is worth noting that you will need to discover and deliver a more nuanced view of the characters on the stage in this drama. During mediation, you will have an opportunity to test your perception of the other party; the other party will have an opportunity to test their perception of you. Each party plays a reciprocal role in the other's drama. Discovering the nature of the character you play in the other party's "movie" can prove informative and can allow you to renegotiate the role you play, prompting them to rewrite their script. As they redraft and polish the script, inevitably, change occurs.

When a party discovers how their counterpart sees them it can be startling—the character they play in the other's drama is not who they know themselves to be. The mediator helps them understand that just as they have been misperceived, they have also miscast the other party. After the opening stage, the dance of identity negotiation begins in earnest.

This does not mean you end up perceiving the other party exactly as they perceive themselves. A perfect match may be impossible to achieve. Nonetheless, each party ends up viewing the other party as "not as bad as I originally thought." This allows the parties to renegotiate their relationship and recast their roles in the common drama. As each party shares their inner narrative—the why behind what they did—perceptions are adjusted. When we hear the other person describe the "why" behind their actions, we see how what they did made sense *from their viewpoint*. We realize they were not operating within our frame of reference.

In the legend, Francis tells the *wolf* how the townspeople of Gubbio have experienced his actions and he describes how the *wolf*

is seen by those trying to kill him. In the briefing, Francis lays the groundwork for the *wolf* to “come to the table,” hoping that when the *wolf* realizes he is perceived as a cold-blooded killing machine he will want to correct the misperception.

In many cases, a need to remedy misperceptions motivates a party to engage in mediation. Learning that “who they are” is misrepresented and misunderstood prompts a desire to tell their story; they engage the process with the intention of “setting the record straight.”

In their effort to correct misperceptions, questions arise: How did I come to see the other party as I do? What happened to make the other party think of me as they do? In response, we pull the string on events that contributed to views that are less than accurate; we search for ways to eliminate errors and recalibrate our perceptions to more closely align with all the information.

the hidden influence

It is common to find that each party’s perception of the other has been colored by hidden, negative third party influences. In other words, we often hear one party talk about the other in the following terms: “Mrs. X warned me about them. I should have listened. She said they were shifty and up to no good.” Too often we accept gossip, innuendo, and character assassination that taint our views; most of the time we are not aware of this pernicious hidden influence. Innuendo and slanderous whispers settle into the lower reaches of our consciousness where they simmer and lead us to feel hostility against the other party that extends beyond reasonable bounds.

In most cases, the influence of the negative third party sets in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy: after we hear bad things about a person, we distrust them, which causes them to distrust us in a reciprocal manner. The other party mirrors our distrust and becomes wary; we mistranslate their wariness as a sign of shiftiness. Their “shifty” behavior causes us to constantly question their motives, which leads them to dislike us even more; eventually, they turn away from us and refuse to meet their obligations.

The end result fulfills the prophecy of the negative third party: it appears the one about whom they gossiped really was “up to no

good.” We fail to realize the entire chain of events was set in motion by the subtle slander of a destructive third party acting as a hidden influence in the conflict. The hostility generated by this scenario tends to be significant and rarely dissipates until we review the history of the conflict and discover the source of animosity and misperception that have taken root in our consciousness.

This situation is common, as all too often we accept the word of another without taking the time to check facts. We are particularly susceptible to words whispered in confidence during the destructive third party’s counterfeit efforts “to protect us.” Rarely do we bother to investigate in depth. Subject to this negative influence, our view of the other becomes tainted.

As we gain experience and wisdom, we come to recognize that the destructive, negative third party who operates as a hidden influence is *the* primary cause of conflict. We slowly learn to keep our own counsel and avoid thinking poorly or suspiciously of others. As you become experienced in resolving conflicts that are ruining your life, you will learn to automatically look to see if this factor is at work. As you respond to the prompts, make an effort to trace the chain of events and the influences that led to your current perceptions (and misperceptions) of the other and note any outside influences, no matter how subtle, that may have contributed to your misperception.

This factor plays a considerable role in failed attempts at conflict resolution, so I take up the subject in greater detail in Chapter Eighteen when I address impediments that cause failed reconciliation. If you suspect this factor is stalling your forward progress at this stage, turn ahead and become more familiar with the influence of the hidden destructive third party.

framing

The mediator guides early discussions, modeling the skill of framing. Framing involves presenting information in words and in a style acceptable to the other party. There are many ways we can convey our concerns. Some approaches increase understanding and willingness to collaborate; other approaches trigger negative emotions and destroy willingness to communicate.

The mediator coaches the parties to avoid triggering unwanted emotions. A party learns to tell the same story with a different frame by watching the mediator paraphrase in ways the other party is willing to hear. As discussed earlier, one way to reframe a narrative is to use “I messages” that tell the story in first person terms, explaining how events made you feel rather than expressing “this is what you did to me.” The frame shifts from blaming the other party to sharing how events made you feel.

In reframing, the mediator does not misrepresent a party’s concerns but rather finds a delivery that avoids negative reactions. Avoiding all negative reactions is impossible; the effort is to sufficiently minimize negative emotional reactions so the process builds momentum. At certain “tipping points” negative emotions may abort the process so we attempt to avoid the problem with skillful framing.

The mediator is transparent in his use of framing, modeling styles of communication the parties may eventually adopt as their own. They learn there is not only one way to put forth their concerns, but rather a number of ways, some more successful than others.⁴ The mediator helps the parties transform language meant to incite, wound, and offend into language conducive to resolution and reconciliation. Language is used to draw parties together rather than push them apart. Parties become aware of the manner in which their choice of language and their delivery style affects the process; they discover the connection between their approach and the results.

avoid blaming

Framing helps avoid “I am right and you are wrong” dichotomies. As previously discussed, most humans have a strong need to be right. Being wrong equates at an unconscious level with non-survival while being right equates with survival. Most people fight to satisfy their need to be right, even when the consequences of carrying on the fight are dire. Thus, the mediator looks for ways to help a party frame their statements and expressions without attributing blame (“you are wrong”).

It is vital parties learn that while they may have a need to be right, being right does not necessarily translate into making the other person

wrong. We may assume the two go hand in hand, that if I make myself right the other party must wrong; a mediator, however, demonstrates this is not necessarily the case. A party can learn to narrate events without adding commentary that assigns blame. Parties learn that stories can be nuanced rather than either-or in nature; they learn that multiple perspectives can co-exist without contradiction. An abstract model of the conflict “playing field” begins to look a lot more like a network of views rather than two poles standing in stark opposition to one another.

If a party becomes aware that an in-depth discussion of “what happened” is going to take place, they have less need to rush to judgments that attribute cause at the outset. A narrative delivered in a matter-of-fact manner avoids the blame, anger, and unproductive positioning that emerges in response to a style peppered with “you did this to me.”

This does not mean you must avoid all discussion of how the other party’s actions affected you. Rather you let your hurt be known in a frame that focuses on your hurt—not on fixing blame. When blaming takes place, parties become reticent to convene and hostile toward the conflict resolution process; they may be willing to attempt to reconcile but they are not about to submit themselves to being blamed at the outset of the process. One way to move around this dilemma is to concentrate on “I messages.”

using “i” messages

In order to avoid challenging and blaming the other party you can use the “I” message technique covered earlier as a way to frame statements regarding personal wounds you have suffered. An “I message” changes the focus from “you hurt me” to “I was hurt when...” In other words, events are described in terms of how they affected the person speaking, leaving the attribution of cause open for further discussion.

A party speaks from her inner narrative regarding “how it seemed to her” rather than issuing evaluative statements that claim “your actions caused me harm.” “I messages” frame the narrative in terms of “this is how I felt when that happened” while avoiding blaming; they call for speaking from the heart regarding how you experienced events.

At first glance, you might object, arguing such an approach is simple avoidance. “Why not call a spade a spade and just tell the truth? They hurt me. That is what happened.” While there is merit to this view it lacks pragmatic value. When you accuse someone of hurting you, you risk ending the conversation. Few people can tolerate being made wrong; most people shut down and walk away. In most instances, the conflict escalated to its present state partially as a result of blaming; continuing that pattern will not bring change. Blaming and shaming lead to a cessation of communication and an escalation of conflict. If one wishes to affix blame and cause the other party shame, one also must expect continued escalation of conflict.

If you narrate the events that caused you harm, you are being honest and accurate. It is difficult for another to challenge the fact that you felt harmed, for that is what you experienced; only you would know how you truly felt. The other party may respond that they would not have felt the same way but that does not speak to how you felt, which is the issue.

When you go forward in this manner and use “I messages” to speak of your hurt, the door is left open for the other party to enter into the narrative, as they are not automatically triggered into a defensive posture. They may even express empathy for the pain you experienced and they may acknowledge they caused your injury, while stating their intention was not to cause you pain. They may apologize for the unintended consequences of their acts. Or they may accept full responsibility and on their own, without being backed into a corner, come to accept they intended and caused harm for which they now feel remorse.

Contrast these possible outcomes with the most likely response to being blamed, which is self-defense. We typically experience blame as an attack on our identity and our survival and when we are threatened we defend or retreat. We can recall our own history and realize how much more likely we were to offer an apology and make amends when we were not under direct attack.

Turning to the legend, we realize that if the very first meeting with the *wolf* had taken place with the people of Gubbio and not Francis, the citizens would have levied blame at the *wolf* and perhaps the *wolf* would have blamed the townspeople. The emotions on both sides were too raw for a joint session to have turned out otherwise.

For this reason Francis went alone to encounter the *wolf*. When he first spoke with the *wolf* he may have told him of the town's pain and suffering and might even have mentioned the manner in which they blamed him, but Francis would not have leveled blame at the *wolf*.

With an attitude that conveyed his understanding of how the *wolf* also may have experienced negative emotions and misgivings, Francis might have asked if it was possible for the *wolf* to understand the feelings of the townspeople. He may have asked, "How do you feel about the town regarding you in such a negative and hostile manner?"

He might have provided the *wolf* with a context and a frame that would allow the *wolf* to look at the situation with fresh eyes. He may have left the door open to expressions of remorse and desire to make up for the damage caused.

The approach Francis takes with the *wolf* opens new doors. Francis meets the *wolf* with compassion and opens doors to the *wolf's* heart by providing the *wolf* with an opportunity to relate his inner narrative. The *wolf*, under Francis' guidance, begins to experience a modicum of hope that there might be ways the town of Gubbio could be approached with a plan for reconciliation.

hope and willingness

While many of the skills and approaches discussed in this chapter have been repeated from earlier chapters, they bear repeating, as the mediator, or the party working on their own, must apply these skills when it comes to the reticent and hostile party. Whereas previously one might have been able to stumble through the process, at this point the concepts must be second nature; the mediator must work quickly and advance with surefootedness. Missteps result in a failure to bring about the hope and willingness needed for the reticent and hostile party to agree to convene a process that might result in reconciliation. Thus, as a mediator or as a party it pays to review the concepts presented until they become a natural part of how one approaches conflict.

A Franciscan View

Francis was no stranger to working with those who had become angry, hostile, and destructive; his insights into peacemaking arose from dealing with the same types of struggles we encounter in our lives. There are times when we will face unpleasant emotions expressed by the other party such as anger or hostility. If we are to be successful in resolving conflict, the manner in which we approach a disgruntled party makes a difference.

In another version of the *Taming the Wolf* legend, “St. Francis talked to the wolf: ‘Brother Wolf, you’ve harmed and hurt people without God’s permission. You’ve killed animals; you’ve killed people, made in God’s image. Well! You deserve to go to the gallows, thieving, murdering criminal that you are. All these people are your enemies, wanting the worst to happen to you. But, Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and them, put a stop to your bad behavior, watch them forgive you of everything—’”⁵

At first glance, Francis appears judgmental and righteous; reading the words alone, we imagine he is berating the *wolf* with a scolding tone. But when we step back and take into account all that we know of Francis, it seems more likely that Francis spoke softly with a matter-of-fact tone.

He did not avoid an honest appraisal of the negative events that had transpired nor did he avoid speaking of the likely consequences that would accrue as a result of such actions; he was candid in his assessment of the retribution the *wolf’s* enemies wished to exact upon him. Yet he was not blaming and punishing, for he expresses his desire to bring about peace and to seek the forgiveness of those the *wolf* harmed.

Another story in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* supports our speculation that Francis did not deliver his notice to the *wolf* in an accusatory or righteous manner. In “Three Thieves Become Friars” Brother Angelo harshly scolds and berates three thieves who show up

at the friary door. As a result, “The robbers left with troubled minds and full of bitterness.”⁶

Francis rebukes Brother Angelo, telling him, “Kindness brings sinners to God far better than harsh words.”⁷ He sends Brother Angelo after the robbers carrying an offer to meet all their needs if they stop their wicked ways. Francis prayed for God to soften the robber’s hearts as Brother Angelo pursued and caught up with the villains.

In response to Brother Angelo’s humble offer, the robbers were heard to say, “We rob, beat and hurt people, even murder. Though we do terrible things, we have no remorse, no bad conscience, no fear of God. But this good friar came to us; More! He apologized for his harsh words justly spoken. He confessed his fault with humility. He even brought bread and wine, and a remarkably generous promise from Father Francis.”⁸

As a result of the kindness shown and the offer of forgiveness extended, the robbers experienced a desire to seek repentance and a new path. They agreed on a plan: “Let us go to Francis; let’s see if he offers any hope at all for God to forgive our sins. We will do whatever he says, for we may succeed in avoiding hell’s pains.”⁹ Eventually, the robbers became friars and followed Francis.

This story confirms our suspicions that Francis understood the need to approach the *wolf* with a non-judgmental demeanor and yet not ignore or avoid discussing transgressions committed. In his talk with the *wolf* Francis would have been gentle and loving yet firm in his commitment to address events that had taken place.

Francis was also fully aware of the toxic role unaddressed anger plays in conflict, as we discover in the story of “St. Francis and the Angry Friar”: “One day at prayer in the friary at Portiuncula, St. Francis saw (by divine revelation) the friary surrounded and attacked by an army of devils. Not one devil could enter; the friars lived holy lives, and the devils therefore found no place to enter. Yet they persisted. One friar got angry at another, and privately thought about accusing him to take revenge. This opened the door and a devil came into the friary to cling to the angry brother.”¹⁰

This story assures us that Francis knew that the destructive emotion of anger, when allowed to persist, was an open invitation to evil influences. Thus we can assume with confidence that he understood

the importance of seeking out and eradicating negative emotions in the process of resolving conflict. The subtle nature of the anger portrayed in the story also alerts us to the fact that such invitations to evil influences need not involve anger that explodes with a burst of loud, dramatic action, but can also draw upon anger simmering below the surface, it can draw from the shallow pool of our resentment.

Negative and hidden third party influences, which have been invited into our lives inadvertently, often lie behind our anger or our destructive actions. Brother Ruffino almost lost his way due to an insidious destructive third party and as a result was on the verge of destroying the Franciscan Order. The tale of these events is found in "The Devil and Brother Ruffino."¹¹ In this "little flower," the devil, disguised as "the Crucified," appeared to Brother Ruffino and planted jealousy and sorrow in his mind by informing the brother that he was not "one of the elect"; this destructive third party then nurtured the brother's doubt and depression when he said, "No one who follows Francis can enter [heaven]."¹²

As a result, Brother Ruffino "lost every bit of trust and respect for Francis and could not disclose a thing."¹³ This is the classic destructive third party at work behind the scenes, planting negative information the party does not feel free to share. Francis, however, with the help of the Holy Spirit, perceived the trouble that was taking root in Brother Ruffino's heart. He sent Brother Masseo to Brother Ruffino to help Ruffino recognize he had been deceived by false appearances intended to destroy him and the Order.

The fear and depression Brother Ruffino suffered and the damage done to his relationship with Francis were the result of falsehoods intended to cause harm. In a teaching moment, Francis subsequently provided Brother Ruffino with a litmus test for future use: "the devil means to harden your heart against everything good; but Christ never hardens the hearts of His faithful ones..."¹⁴ Using this test, we can consult the heart of the party beset by anger and skepticism and assess for influences that have hardened their heart. At the same time, we introduce compassionate influences that soften their heart.

In the Admonitions, we discover negative third party influence was not something Francis took lightly; he considered the subject important enough to be included in his guidance to the brothers. In

Admonition 25, Francis instructs the brothers, “Blessed is the servant who would love and respect his brother as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him, and would not say anything behind his back that he would not charitably say in his presence.”¹⁵ In this admonition, Francis warns the brothers to avoid engaging in such harmful behavior. We should also be warned to not let such harmful behavior on the part of another push us into conflict.

He takes up the same theme in other instructions: “As in Admonition 25, Chapter 11 of Francis’s First Rule encourages the brothers to love one another and to avoid behavior that would tear down the brotherhood.”¹⁶ Francis anticipated the destructive effect of gossip on the Order; the amount of focus he gives to this problem is a good indication of experience he gained while sorting out conflicts. He wrote, “And all the brothers should guard themselves lest they calumniate [bad mouth; put down; slam; slander; malign] or contend with words. Rather let them strive to maintain silence, whenever God grants this grace to them.”¹⁷

The sting of put-downs and ridicule is something we have all felt; we are aware of the role bullying plays in conflict. At the same time, we should not overlook the slander we do not hear—the slander whispered into the ear of another—which cuts us silently and invisibly. The metaphorical knife plunged into our back when we are not looking sends us into pain-induced rage that may make us look mad to the naïve observer.

Francis was not naïve: he spoke out against these deadly practices. “And let them slander no one. Let them not murmur, nor speak detraction against others, because it is written: *‘Gossips and detractors are hateful to God.’*”¹⁸

The excerpt from the Rule continues, “Let them not judge. Let them not condemn. And as the Lord says, let them not pay attention to the minute sins of others.”¹⁹ Here we have valuable instructions to guide us as we unearth the hidden influence driving hostility, anger, and rage from its invisible perch just outside our line of sight. We learn to expand our perceptions, broaden our view, and dig below the surface to locate these hidden sources of conflict.

The following prophetic statement guides not only our future efforts to maintain peace, but also provides us with clues that turn our

attention to past events that have given birth to conflict. The statement is an attempt to sort out causes that must be located in order to defuse animosity: “The loose lips of gossip, slander, and detraction have sunk many a fraternity. And isn’t it so self-righteously pleasant to talk about our deep fraternal love for all when the cantankerous brother who drives us up a wall is on vacation or away on an extended assignment?”

Scripture

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances;

— **2 Corinthians 12:20**

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

— **James 4: 11-12**

Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave’s name was Malchus. So Jesus said to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?”

— **John 18:10-11**

*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners
against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*
— Hebrews 12:3