Empowered Relationships and
Conflict Transformation
Draft – 11-2015

The Common Fire Foundation was established in the early 2000s to support the development of intentional communities strongly committed to social justice and environmental sustainability. It was involved in the establishment of a housing co-op in Tivoli, NY (shuttered in 2013) and a co-housing community in Beacon, NY, and was deeply involved in a community that did a lot of great organizing work over several years but never acquired land in California's Bay Area. More info, including Common Fire's vision document and video which have been deeply inspiring to many people, are available at www.commonfire.org

Living in an intentional community is a quintessentially human experience. Our time in community is defined by our relationships with other people. We invite the fullness of who each of us is, and we are constantly interacting with each other and experiencing our different behaviors and values and emotions and quirks. It's important to have some agreed upon principles for how we relate with each other so we can enjoy the richest experience possible experience and avoid some of the common pitfalls.

In particular, it's important how we approach conflict. Conflict is a natural and necessary part of being in community. Depending on how we approach it, it can be a path to self-discovery and stronger connections within the community or it can block all forward movement and make people want to run for the hills.

Best Practices and Support in Relationships and Conflict

<u>Getting to Know and Really See Each Other</u>

Communities tend to invest time on a regular basis in nurturing healthy relationships. That's a large part of why we're in community, and it can help prevent issues from coming up in the first place. Tree Bressen, a group process consultant, writes that "the most important conflict resolution method is preventative: building positive connections with the people you live with so that when something hard does come up, you are well positioned to deal with it together."

* In all of the Common Fire communities a lot of time was dedicated to "check-ins" that were much deeper than we experienced in most other communities. For the Tivoli co-op we dedicated an hour each week to this. We heard from each person what is most important to them to share about what's going on in their life, in their mind and heart. We would hold more time when someone needs it if something is really up for them.

* In the Tivoli Co-op we also dedicated one of our weekly gathering nights to "getting-to-know-us" discussions and activities, where little or no "business" was considered. For the Beacon community we dedicated one afternoon each month.

Regular, Supported Opportunities for Addressing Issues

In the Tivoli Co-op we dedicated up to 30 minutes at every weekly gathering after the check-ins for "Elephants in the Room". This was a time for people to raise any issues that had come up for them and to practice using a conflict resolution process. The facilitator would end that time after 30 minutes unless the group by consensus decided it was important to extend the time.

If nothing is up for people, this could be pretty quick. But we wanted to create a culture that supports people to be proactive about verbalizing what's up for them and not letting time pass if they are holding anything.

Orientation and Trainings

* At the Tivoli Co-op we provided this document as an orientation to new members, and we committed two afternoons a year to conflict resolution training and support.

* In the Bay Area and Beacon we held extensive trainings in the Be Present Empowerment Model (bepresent.org), which is not a conflict resolution model, but is intimately related with preventing and resolving conflict.

* We never did this. Loved the idea but never got around to it: Bring copies of one of the many great articles on conflict from Communities Magazine or the FIC website, have everyone in the community read it and then simply discuss. Doing this regularly could really increase everyone's fluency and comfort in dealing with conflict!!!

Mediation and Support

* Peer Mediation – In the Tivoli Co-op we tried to have someone always be available to help other people talk about a conflict outside of the whole group, in a a private, mediated way. This opportunity allows both parties to share more than they might feel comfortable sharing in a group - and to be able to have another person there to create a safe, welcoming space.

* Inviting an outside facilitator to a special meeting to deal with issues that have already bubbled up makes a safe space where people can come to agreements and see things from other points of view. An outside facilitator can spotlight developing conflict if invited on a regular basis (once or twice a year), and can be particularly effective when structural issues are at play in the conflict. Perhaps exchanges can be established with other communities or groups.

The following awesomeness is from Tree Bressen (http://treegroup.info/topics/A7-conflict.html)

Third Party Support

People are often reluctant to seek outside support for handling a conflict. There seems to be a stigma associated with asking for help, similar to that formerly associated with seeing a therapist. Many communities have some form of conflict resolution team available, but individual members may rarely call on it.

I propose not waiting until a situation becomes a big deal before asking for help. Timely assistance can help keep energy flowing so that things don't build to a breaking point. Some communities have professional mediators in residence and that's great if it's available, but don't assume the only person qualified to step in is someone with a piece of paper and letters after their name. My experience has been that almost anyone can help, as long as all the parties involved feel comfortable with the person. The main requirement, in my opinion, is to remember that you are there to help everyone feel heard, hold the space, and trust the process.

Help everyone feel heard. Let's say Morgan and Dan are in a conflict, sitting together with Raindrop as a support person. If Morgan starts explaining her view, ideally Dan would be able to reflect it back piece by piece. However, if Dan is too triggered to do that, Raindrop as support person should be able to reflect back what Morgan has said at any time. If the support person notices common ground between the two people, it can be useful to state that.

If Morgan is upset, she'll likely want to explain her whole upset in one big, long speech. However, doing that will actually prevent her needs getting met, because there's no way Dan is going to be able to remember all of what she said and reflect it back so that Morgan feels heard. What's needed is for Raindrop as support person to gently interrupt Morgan after each piece, making the opening for Dan to reflect back. Believe it or not, even two to three minutes is typically too long a piece for someone to remember—look for one chunk of information presented in a minute or two and then pause for reflecting.

Hold the space and trust the process. Raindrop is not there to solve Dan and Morgan's problems for them. The support person needs to believe that the people involved are fully capable of moving through the process to find their own solutions. Raindrop is there as a witness; to remind Morgan and Dan of any communication guidelines they may have (such as the specificity recommendation mentioned above); and to keep good goals and intentions in mind and within reach.

Liza Gabriel Ravenheart, an experienced ritual leader, introduced me to the technique of asking participants in a mediation to invoke the qualities they want

present before the mediation starts. At the beginning of what we knew would be a particularly intense session, four of us present called aloud attributes we wanted in the space during our interaction: "honesty . . . love . . . compassion . . . fairness . . . caring . . . listening. . . ." The list went on for several minutes and set the tone for what turned out to be a very successful resolution.

If two people in a conflict are reluctant to enter into mediation, remind them that unresolved "stuff" between any two people affects the rest of the group too. The most common reason why people are reluctant to attempt conflict resolution is because they are holding despair about the outcome—they think the effort will be futile. With the help of the tools presented here, hopefully you as a group member will be in a position to offer support and constructive suggestions toward resolution.

Relationship Principles and Tips

<u>Address it or Let it Go</u>

Within the Tivoli co-op the expectation was that if tension arises for someone, they need to either bring it up with the other people involved or they need to sincerely release their concerns and feelings about it. They need to do one or the other as soon as possible, but definitely **no later than one week after it came up**.

* We believe that by sharing our concerns and our feelings, we give a gift to the community and ourselves.
* We gain insight into our triggers and our needs, which in turn provides insight into deeper things that might be going on for us.
* We discover patterns in our beliefs and actions that may not be healthy for us or for our relationships.
* We support that other person to better see their own behaviors and the impact they had on us, and perhaps have had on others as well, in a feedback loop.
* We clear up any misperceptions or misunderstandings we both may be holding
* We learn how better to hold and honor each other.

If we don't share our concerns and just hold onto them, we miss out on these opportunities. We may end up hurting the other person, ourselves, and the community by engaging in passive-aggressive behavior, and the other person's behavior may very well continue. We also may hold the tension of conflict in our bodies - keeping big emotions bottled up has a negative effect on our health and well-being. And we may be digging a hole for ourselves and the other person - all too often, those experiences feed a perception of the other person we create based on our own assumptions, some of which may not be true or shared by other people, and can over time create a distorted and hard-to-release way of seeing the other person. That makes it even harder to relate to them and honor them, and usually leads to more issues.

Alternately, it's totally valid to just release our concerns and feelings - if we can really do so. We may decide that it was really just a passing or minor thing, or that we were just tired or in a bad mood. For example, maybe we were just impatient because of something else that had just happened. The question is, can we really move forward "clean" with ourselves and the other person, where it doesn't affect our perception of the other person or our behavior towards them? It's not always easy to do this, and we should be careful that we don't just try to "release" things because we have insecurities about dealing with conflict.

If someone doesn't address something that's up for them within a week, then it should be treated the same way as when other house norms aren't respected. One-on-one or in group time we should try to help the person understand what's going on for them that they haven't addressed it. Perhaps there's somoething they can learn about themselves from this experience, or perhaps something the group can do to support them and everyone to more easily address concerns.

Not addressing something (or releasing it) pretty consistently does have an impact both for that person and the group, so it's something that needs to be addressed if it continues to happen, the same as if someone repeatedly misses meetings or doesn't do their chores.

Speaking from the "I"

Nobody can dispute our own feelings and perceptions, they are ours and are real. They exist as social facts and influence thoughts and actions. By making statements about ourselves and our own feelings and perceptions (speaking from the "I") and limiting how much we name what we think other people are feeling or what they mean, we give ourselves the best chance of being heard by not triggering the other person or stimulating them to get defensive; and we hold space for others to bring forth their own experiences, allowing assumptions that we or they have made to potentially be illuminated and changed.

Emotions

Emotions are important and are welcome! If you're feeling emotions, please share them. And if other people have feelings, please welcome them. There's important information in the feelings: they help us better understand the fullness of what's going on for ourselves or others; they can be a portal to discovering something deeper that's going on; and they allow us to better connect with our hearts, which allows us to better hear other people and be heard!

Conflict Has a Cultural Component

The way we were raised and the social identities we have influence how we have conflict. It's a good thing to be aware of when having conflict, especially in groups that include people of difference cultures, races, ages, genders, and classes. We need to

remember that the way some people are used to having conflict might not be the way others are used to having conflict.

There is no "correct way" to have conflict. When we aren't open to the ways in which people might express themselves, i.e. "you don't have to yell or be so angry" or "why don't you just say what you mean, speak up" we run the risk of creating invisible norms that tell the group how to have conflict. This norm can limit the number of people who feel comfortable participating and, as a result, exclude some from the opportunity to express themselves and get everything truly out in the open.

However, as a group we can create workable ways for each of us to feel empowered and self expressed in confronting conflict in ourselves and our relationships. Some suggestions for coming to an agreement:

* Approach conflict openly and with awareness about how you prefer to have conflict and how this might be related to your cultural upbringing.

* If someone is expressing themselves in a way that contributes to you feeling uncomfortable take a look at that with curiosity. Ask yourself, what is it about the way this conflict is being expressed that is bothering me.

* Learn about the stereotypes and generalizations that get made connecting social identities and conflict. Watch out for how they show up in your own behavior. Think about gender, ethnicity, class. Think about privilege, and silence.

<u>Boundaries of Healthy Conflict</u>

At the same time, there are definitely many ways of handling conflict out there in the world, some of them intimately related to culture or gender or class, etc., that we do *not* want to invite into the community and need to draw some boundaries around. For example, physical violence is absolutely unacceptable. Emotional or verbal abuse is also unacceptable.

Help! We probably all agree on some things that feel clearly out of bounds in the verbal realm, like blatant insults, threats, or name-calling. But it seems it would be good to offer guidelines for navigating the area where boundaries become murky. Because at some point it starts to cross over into that question of different styles and cultures that we're trying to respect and hold space for.

For example, yelling. Is it ok to yell as a way to vent so long as we don't yell at someone? Or is yelling at someone acceptable so long as it's not in their face? Does it matter if there's a power differential (like an adult and a kid)? Or is it a question of how the person is owning or naming their anger, for example, they're not just triggered and dumping their stuff on the other person? Or if the receiving person doesn't have a history of verbal abuse?

<u>Talking About Others When They Aren't Present</u>

The following awesomeness is from the Fellowship of Intentional Community (http://www.ic.org/wiki/interpersonal-relationships-and-conflict-resolution/#Triangulation:_talking_about_others_when_they_are_not_present)

When people get into conflicts with each other, one of the fine arts of conflict is to use triangulation to bring people to your side of the issue. The way this works is that when A and B have a conflict, B talks to C and tells C lots of negative things about A. The goal of this type of triangulation is to degrade the person not present. This kind of malicious gossip can occur very easily and spontaneously, you may not even realize what it has done until you analyze why you feel a certain way towards someone, or how you ever got such a wrong notion about someone. Malicious triangulation is very dysfunctional behavior and is one of the worst things that can happen in a community. Malicious gossip and character assassination undermine relationships in a huge way. They poison people's perspectives of each other, fill voids of understanding with misinformation and deceit, and create an atmosphere of distrust, disrespect and paranoia.

Now sometimes, to help your own understanding of people and their conflicts you need to get and share information about people who are not present. This is healthy and normal and there is an easy test to distinguish between what is healthy and helpful and what is unhealthy and destructive. It's the invisible person test. When the topic of someone who is not present comes up, imagine that the person of whom you are speaking or hearing about is standing behind you. If what you say, or hear would make that person angry, defensive, or unhappy you are engaged in an unhealthy triangulation.

When you find yourself in triangulations about others, use the invisible person test and point it out to those present. If you go along with triangulation and character assassination, you become an accomplice to dysfunctional behavior that is very destructive to relationships. Relationships are the foundation of community.

If you don't care about the community dynamic involved here let me add something to catch your self interest: People who gossip to you, in turn, will gossip about you. So if you want to create a place where you don't have to worry about what people are saying about YOU behind YOUR back, it is worth the personal investment to point out triangulation whenever it happens.

Conflict Resolution Processes

We feel really good about these two processes, which are very similar. Even when deeper things are really going on and it would be good to try to get at those, these processes offer a way to chip away at something big, to get some concrete bandaids in place (bandaids are exactly what is needed sometimes), to help contain a discussion when there are a lot of things going on, and to create some accountability for a person or situation that is really troubling people, which in turn gives people a way to move forward with either changing someone's problematic behavior or gaining clarity about their inability to change.

* This first process is our best framing of what was shared with us by Kiran Nigam of the AORTA Collective, based on Laird Schaub's process:

> *Circle – for each of these do a go around. It is not a discussion or a response.*
>
> *1. What is happening. "I see, I saw, I hear, I heard..." Not "You're doing…"*
>
> *2. How do you feel? "I feel..."*
>
> *3. What do you need? "I need..." Write it all out as we go so it's visible. Kiran notes, "We have goals we must fulfill before we come to resolution."*
>
> *4. What are you going to do about it?*
>
> *Often a mandate comes out. "I agree to not do or say X in this time frame." Or "You need to do X in this time frame." Regather after some weeks and evaluate whether the person has made the changes. If not then you need to take it very seriously.*

* Here's another, very similar, from Tree Bressen. The key difference seems to be that Tree has people reflect back through the whole process.

> *In order to apply these steps, have each person in a conflict answer each of these questions in order, with each answer being reflected back until all parties feel sufficiently heard.*
>
> *1. What do you see happening? (Observations)*
> *2. How do you feel about it? (Feelings)*
> *3. What do you want to have happen? (Requests)*
> *4. What can we agree to do about it? (Agreements)*

* The Federation for Intentional Communities offers this great suggestion: "Do a trial solution. Let's try this for 3 weeks and evaluate it. Often a group must make decisions without adequate knowledge or experience. Doing a trail solution and then evaluating the results can often result in future changes and also can reassure reluctant participants, since the decision is not permanent. "

The following is a great additional resource on the topic of Relationships and Conflict Resolution:
http://www.ic.org/wiki/interpersonal-relationships-and-conflict-resolution/