

Peace Begins Without You Why We Need Conflict

by

Todd F. Eklof

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It may be that sometimes the only difference between “wrong” action and “right” action is our underlying motivation. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare advised, “This above all: To thine own self be true;” why the word’s, “Know thyself” were carved above the entrance to Plato’s academy; and why Socrates told an Athenian court, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Unfortunately, it’s impossible to ever fully understand ourselves, what’s going on deep down inside us, and what our true motives are, for we are mostly unconscious creatures who experience fleeting moments of limited consciousness at best. Meister Eckhart said, “The ground of our being is dark.”¹ This is similar to what Carl Jung meant when he spoke of the Shadow, that which personifies everything we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves. It isn’t necessarily our “bad” side, just our dark-side. Just as the Universe is 95 percent “dark matter,” we are mostly creatures of the night, creatures of shadow, unconscious creatures, which is why self-examination ought to be a continuing practice throughout our lives.

The paradox of self-exploration, however, is that the more we come to learn about ourselves, the less we know about ourselves, and the more mysterious life becomes. This is why contemplative people tend towards humility and quiet, particularly in how they relate to others. For if we can hardly know ourselves, who are we to judge or presume we can know what is best for others. “And so I warn you,” wrote the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, “think twice about passing judgment on the lives of [others]. In the privacy of your own conscience judge yourself as you see fit before God or before your spiritual [mentors], but do not meddle in the lives of others.”² This unknown writer is the same one who said, “Just as the *cloud of unknowing* lies above you between you and your God, so you must fashion a *cloud of forgetting* beneath you, between you and every created thing.”³ In other words, there is little we can truly know about the hidden or manifest worlds and yet, nonetheless, as this mystical writer advises, we “must learn to be at home in this darkness.”⁴ It is, as Rilke expressed;

You darkness, that I come from,

I love you more than all the fires
that fence in the world,
for the fire makes
a circle of light for everyone,
and then no one outside learns of you.
But the darkness pulls in everything:
shapes and fires, animals and myself,
how easily it gathers them!—

powers and people—
and it is possible a great energy
is moving near me.
I have faith in nights.⁵

Yet, for many of us, surrendering to this darkness—to knowing so little about ourselves, God, and others—is not easy. For if we were to truly look into our souls and see the nothingness that is at the center of all things we would have to admit that we aren't real, that we're not really here. Such an admission is especially difficult for the one creature on Earth that has developed an "ego," that is, the slight awareness of one's own existence. In German, the language of Freud, "ego" simply means "I." Ego is that part of us that sees ourselves as distinct from everyone and everything else, that part of us that manages to put a boundary between us and the rest of the world in an effort to shore up our own identity. It is like a finely honed beam of light that illuminates only one part of a room or object at a time. But because it is only the light, it doesn't recognize the darkness at all, or that the rest of the room, indeed, the rest of the Universe, the rest of reality, are made up of darkness. The ego exists only within the limits of its own experience, yet mistakes itself as the whole world and the whole of reality.

Because it mistakes its universe for the Universe, and fears the dark, fears facing the truth about its limitations, the ego constantly tries to shore up its sense of reality by constantly redefining the boundaries it has created for itself. Some egos take this so seriously that they physically try to create a well-defined body through obsessive exercise in order to feel real. Others do the same thing by defining themselves through financial success, or the accumulation of things, or developing expertise on one or a few subjects. To identify with our bodies, our professions, our property, or even our thoughts, helps us to stand out by defining ourselves, drawing ourselves onto the landscape of life, albeit it two-dimensionally, that we might feel real. Perhaps the simplest and most common way to separate ourselves from the world around us and to make us feel real, however, is by creating conflict. To identify with our problems, after all, doesn't require us to exercise our lazy bodies, to struggle for success or wealth in a dog-eat-dog world, or to bore ourselves by reading and studying. It's easy to create problems for ourselves, and even easier to blame those problems on others so that we can stand apart from them. "The ego, of course, loves that," writes Eckhart Tolle, "It is always seeking for something to attach itself to in order to uphold and strengthen its illusory sense of self, and it will readily attach itself to your problems."⁶

This is the reason ego is the root of all conflict and all wars, because frightened people want to make themselves feel real even though we're not. But if we're not real, what are we? Don't I have a body? Don't I have memories and thoughts that are my own? "*Cogito ergo sum*," I think, therefore I am! Yet quantum science now tells us, as Frank Tipler explains, that, "at the subnuclear level, the quarks and gluons which make up the neutrons and protons of the atoms in our bodies are being annihilated and recreated on a

timescale of less than 10-23 seconds.”⁷ In other words, the pattern we call our body is preserved, while its substance is being replaced so fast we don’t even notice it. Quantum science has also discovered that there’s very little matter in the Universe, that we are mostly energy, and that if we could see ourselves on the quantum level our bodies would be as empty as intergalactic space. So, for the most part, we’re not here, at least not physically. Our memories and thoughts, likewise, are even more fleeting than our bodies. We change our minds, and we forget, or misremember events.

So what are we if we’re not individuals? If we’re not really here? This, of course, is part of the mystery and why we must continue leading the examined life. Yet the mystics, those who embrace the mists, the clouds of unknowing, the darkness, tend to suggest that we are part of the whole of existence, rather than our own limited experiences. In Buddhism this insight is called *vipasyana*, which means, “looking deeply,” which implies the examined life, going into the darkness. As Thich Nhat Hanh explains, “‘Looking deeply’ means observing something or someone with so much concentration that the distinction between observer and observed disappears.”⁸ He goes on to explain that, “When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence.”⁹ Each of us is like the flower, here only in relationship to everything else. All is One, and no one is an island unto oneself.

Nevertheless, the ego ceaselessly secures its false sense of independence by denying the interdependent web of all existence. And it does this mostly by creating conflict with others. Creating conflict requires taking a stand, drawing a line in the sand, which can serve as an ego boundary—I’m right and you’re wrong! Thus, engaging in conflict helps define us. Unfortunately, because the ego can never fully know itself, it always needs more, more success, more wealth, more stuff, more knowledge, and, especially, more conflict. It strengthens its illusion of self through disagreement and the feeling of being right.

So we might say, “*Conflictus ergo sum*; I fight, therefore I am,” but we would never say, *pax ergo sum*, “peace therefore I am,” because this is a contradiction in terms. To truly be at peace with others requires us to dissolve our ego boundaries to become as one. Peace happens when *I am not!* Again, the contemplative, the one who has made peace with the darkness, does not distinguish between oneself and others. As the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* explains, “In reality, no man is a stranger to him because he looks on each man as his brother. And none is his enemy. All are his friends. Even those who hurt or offend him in everyday life are as dear to him as his best friends and all the good he desires for his best friends he desires for them.”¹⁰ Or, as Ueshiba taught us, “As soon as you consider the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ of your fellows, you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competing with, and criticizing others

weaken and defeat you.”¹¹

But if conflict is born from ego, how are we to engage in the work of justice? Isn't activism a form of conflict that is necessary to transform our world? The answer, of course, is *yes*. We are called to transform our world, for we are part of the world, and all the pain and suffering that goes on anywhere is our own. But this goes back to perspective and to motivation. Why do we engage in conflict? Is it to sooth our egos? Or is it truly for the cause of justice, coming from a place of compassion, of connectedness with others, not separation? Perhaps a better way to look at it is to understand that justice doesn't come from engaging in conflict, but from working to end all conflict. As the Great Teacher, Morihei Ueshiba explained, “A warrior is charged with bringing a halt to all contention and strife,”¹² and “the true meaning of the term *samurai* is one who serves and sticks to the power of love.”¹³ Ueshiba understood, as he put it, “If you have not linked yourself to true emptiness, you will never understand the Art of Peace.”¹⁴

True, we have been gifted with the power of movement, of activity. The very word, “soul,” comes from the Latin word *anima*, the root of the word “animation.” Of course we are to be active! But activism doesn't require creating conflict with others, it means creating peace and bringing an end to conflict. It means letting go of ego, of our need to be right and to be real. It means emptying ourselves. Again, as the unknown mystic explained, “Do *not* try to withdraw into yourself, for to put it simply, I do not want you to be anywhere; no, not outside, above, behind, or beside yourself... for I would indeed have you be nowhere.”¹⁵ This is what it means to let go of ego, and to enter into the darkness, into that emptiness at the center of all things; from the tiny black hole at the center of each particle, to the gigantic black hole at the center of each galaxy, to the primordial darkness at the beginning of time, to the shadow that is our unconscious mind and boundless soul. “There is evil and disorder in the world,” Ueshiba said, “because people have forgotten that all things emanate from once source. Return to that source, and leave behind all self-centered thoughts, petty desires, and anger. Those who are possessed by nothing, possess everything.”¹⁶

¹ Fox, Matthew & Sheldrake, Rupert, *Natural Grace*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1996, p.138.

² Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & Book of Privy Council*, Doubleday, Random House, Inc., 1973, 1996, p. 77.

³ *Ibid.* p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 41.

⁵ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans., Robert Bly, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1981, p. 21

⁶ Tolle, Eckhart, *The Power of Now*, New World Library, Novato, CA, 1999, p. 39.

⁷ Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 236.

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Riverhead Books, New York, NY, 1995, p. 11.

9 Ibid.

10 Johnston, *ibid.* p. 71.

11 Ueshiba, Morihei, *The Art of Peace*, Stevens, John, trans., Shambhala Press, Boston, MA, 1992, p. 33.

12 Ibid. p. 41.

13 Ibid, p. 45

14 Ibid. p. 17

15 Johnston, *ibid.* p. 123

16 Ueshiba, *ibid.* p. 16