

Week 22: Putting Stories Before Opinions

The most extreme conflicts conclude with bullets flying and bombs dropping. But the vast majority of conflicts in our world don't make the CNN scroll. They begin with far more subtle differences of opinion, and they destroy relationships and community. Siblings fight over, well, everything. Teenagers fight over the best ways to feel liberated. In marriages, spouses constantly disagree about who is giving more to the relationship, and the peaceful community within those four walls is splintered. In our churches, parishioners disagree about how to worship or which people deserve to be loved and eventually a bunch of them start a new church community down the block. In our workplaces, we disagree about how frequently to meet or whose project should get funded, and the cubicle walls become like prison cells, everyone in their own solitary confinement. In our nation, we slander anyone with a different political ideology—we do it via commercials, debates, social media, and dinner table conversations—and we become a national community in gridlock.

Differences between people create tension, discomfort, and fear. Tension leads to conflict, and conflict results in distance at best and violence at worst. All of it becomes fatal to relationships and connectedness and the belonging we so badly desire. Conflict kills community. But it doesn't have to.

In fact, sometimes, conflict can be the beginning of authentic community.

Several years ago, I stumbled into a particularly heated marijuana debate between two acquaintances—not a couple of half-baked high school kids raging against “the man,” but two highly educated professionals. One man was militantly in favor of legalizing marijuana, the other man violently opposed to it. And they wanted my opinion. I remember feeling a sense of dread, like I was wading into dangerous waters, with hungry things swimming beneath the murky surface. The debate did not go well.

They never do.

Only later, on the way home, did I get a glimpse beneath the surface of those ideological waters. My wife explained that the legalization advocate had recently watched his father die a slow and excruciating death from cancer, while marijuana was the only thing that relieved his father's pain. And, as it turns out, the marijuana opponent had been raised in a family torn apart by drug addiction. That's when I realized what was floating beneath the surface of these competing ideas.

Stories.

The stories of two hurting people. Stories of pain and anguish and loss. Stories that have formed their ideas and opinions and beliefs. Stories that have delivered

them to a natural conclusion about the way the world should work. A person's ideas are never *simply* their ideas. Opinions and beliefs are never born in a vacuum. They are the logical result of our *experiences*.

Every opinion is a story in disguise.

The intensity of any given opinion usually depends upon the intensity of the story that gave rise to it. If you want to understand a person's ideas, you need to understand who they are and the story that has been told with their lives.

Every belief is a story turned into a worldview.

As a therapist, I've learned this from the small and hidden community of two that is the therapy room. For many of us, therapy is the first experience of a relationship that can graciously bear the burden of disagreement, without distance or violence. In this space, we may express an opinion or value that directly opposes the beliefs of our therapist. Yet, the therapist does not respond defensively, or with a desire to change or alter. Instead, the therapist responds with a gentle curiosity, with a desire to understand the story that gave birth to our belief.

This spirit of curiosity and gentle exploration is disarming.

We no longer have to respond with reflexive defensiveness. In the safe space that is created, we can piece together the origins of our beliefs. Whereas before, the need to quickly and effectively defend ourselves obscured our life-story, we now develop a deep, wise understanding of the ways that we were formed. We discover that we can have opinions, and so can others—we don't need to hide them fearfully, but we also don't need to wield them violently. And in doing so, we become a people inviting others into the fullness of their own stories. We become walking storybooks, differently-shaped and differently-believing, but nonetheless writing new chapters of our lives *together*. We discover that conflict need not be the death of relationship and belonging; it can be the birth.

Because, in the end, every conflict is merely a clash of conflicting stories.

Places of belonging are not comprised of identically-minded people. Authentic belonging happens when a group of people—a group as small as two—with a vast array of opinions and differences refuses the temptation to do violence to each other's philosophy or worldview. In a place of true belonging, people and their stories are considered more valuable than being right or feeling validated.

I hope we settle for no less in our friendships and families and neighborhoods, and in our communities of faith and townspeople and countrymen. I hope we disagree, I hope we reveal our stories, and I hope our places of belonging are made true.