

# The Breaks

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learning conflict resolution

## Conflict | Fear | Relationship

*Even a monastery is not free from conflict, and in this searching, honest reflection, **Br. Jim Woodrum** confronts his own tendency to want to flee when things get tough. Find here practical suggestions for dealing with own personal fear responses, as well as practical suggestions for strengthening the internal “breaks” that allow us to deal with conflict more healthily.*

### “Oh, That I Had Wings Like a Dove”

I didn't experience healthy examples of conflict resolution growing up. My parents were not happy in their marriage, and while there was no physical violence, wars of words were an everyday occurrence. Bullying was prevalent all through my primary and secondary education, with antagonism coming from both peers and teachers. Apparently if you wanted to motivate someone to behave and perform the way you wanted them to, there was no method more powerful than invoking fear and shame. You're lazy. We're just trying to learn how to live with you. You need to grow up. Why can't you get your act together? These phrases I've heard and experienced my whole life.

Maybe this is why I have always had difficulty with conflict resolution. Throughout my life, I've wondered why there appear to be so many others who engage in conflict and emerge unscathed.

What about you? If you are like me, you may know the experience of having been bullied as a child and/or adult. You may have been singled out for ridicule based on your looks, your clothes, your interests, or your intellect. Perhaps you have been at the receiving end of verbal abuse from a teacher, mentor, employer, or someone whom you held in high esteem. Maybe you have felt dismissed by a friend, family member, or spouse, and have felt unworthy of love, respect, or dignity.

According to an article published online by Psychology Today, verbal aggression not only damages a child's self-esteem, but also has been found to alter the development of a child's brain. Studies show that emotional pain affects the same part of the brain as physical pain, and that verbal aggression can be internally absorbed by the body. Author Peg Streep summarized the science this way: "Words are powerful—they can lift us up and beat us down, soothe us or wound us."

To be honest, my tendency when I feel threatened is to exit the scene as quickly as possible. Among the rotation of Psalms that we Brothers pray during Morning Prayer at the Monastery is Psalm 55. Its subject is conflict, and I feel similar to the Psalmist when we chant their words: "And I said, 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee to a far-off place and make my lodging in the wilderness. I would hasten to escape from the stormy wind and tempest.'"

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Our limitations challenge us to discover  
and to explore the world that they  
define.

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This passage often takes me back to a memory from early high school. It was customary at band camp to dress the freshmen up in silly outfits one evening at dinner and then to rehearsal directly after. I remember being made to wear a tutu, wig, tiara, and make-up. I felt nothing but shame and humiliation. My fight, flight, or freeze response kicked in, and I chose to run as fast as I could. After a brief search, I was eventually found in my room by an upperclassman who calmed me down and talked me into participating in the initiation with my peers. But I'll never forget that my initial reaction was that I was in danger, and rather than confronting it, I ran.

This insight to "flee" has carried over into my adulthood. I can attest to many instances throughout the years when, in a state of distress over some internal conflict in our community, I've fantasized about "switching communities" - which would be a life-sized version of the "flight" response. In truth, most of us belong to more than one community at a time, and it can be tempting in the face of conflict to simply imagine leaving. We might be prone to wonder: what would it be like if our immediate community (where we may be experiencing conflict more acutely) and our "outer" communities (where relationships may feel easier or less dangerous) switched places? Would being surrounded by different people assuage the intensity of conflict that we experience

within our current inner circle?

Since becoming a monk, I've learned that this fantasy is inspired by a principle called *acedia*, which the desert monastics nicknamed "the noonday demon." *Acedia* is the idea that the grass is greener in other pastures and that, by remaining in our current situation, we are missing out on all that would heal and complete us. While periods of discernment about a change in circumstances might sometime be warranted, usually, the process of healing and completion can often be found - through God's grace - exactly at the place that is the current source of our pain. Leaving would rob us of that chance.

And yet, if we are going to stay, we need to learn strategies for how to engage in conflict well. In an increasingly fast-paced and volatile world, where everyone is talking and no one is listening, learning strategies for self-awareness and the strengthening of the "brakes" of our minds is crucial.

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I want to share some strategies that have proved helpful for me, and which we all—especially those of us who profess Jesus Christ (the prince of peace) as Lord—can employ to strengthen our brakes and foster an atmosphere of safety within us and around us. I hope that these strategies will allow us to experience grace-filled resolutions at the source of conflict. Maybe even to be among the peace-makers in our own orbit.

First, it is crucial that we practice a healthy awareness of our bodies, which helps to facilitate how we experience the world around us, especially when we are in a place of uncertainty. Regardless of brain-type, everyone is equipped with the reptilian brain response of fight, flight, or freeze. Unless you have well-honed self-awareness skills, limbic responses can exacerbate conflict through misunderstanding and miscommunication. When teaching neurodiverse children and adults about their ADHD brains, Psychiatrists Edward Hallowell and John Ratey use the metaphor of having a Ferrari engine for a brain that is ill-equipped with bicycle brakes. The key for those folks—and the rest of us—is to learn strategies that strengthen the brakes.

When I recognize a limbic response in my body resulting from a situation of disagreement with another person, especially someone in my inner-circle, I try to reorient my response to one of curiosity rather than aggression. Curiosity helps me to investigate my feelings by asking a standard set of questions: "What do you mean when you say.....?" "Could you tell me more about that?" By asking the person questions from a place of curiosity, I am better able to determine why I am experiencing anxiety. Is what I thought I heard accurate, or did I misunderstand? Are the feelings I am experiencing in the present situation authentic, or are they tied to either a past situation or preconceived anxieties about the future? Limbic signals received during a disagreement or conflict with someone close to us can feel like—and therefore remind us of—past trauma. But that does not mean that trauma is occurring in this present moment. This truth recalls a slogan used in the room of 12-step recovery: "Feelings are not facts." I have learned that it is more accurate to approach feelings as theories, which—just as in a scientific laboratory—need to be tested quantitatively. Once we determine their accuracy, then we can respond with the intention of preserving the dignity of both us and our perceived adversary.

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## Is it possible, even there, to find freedom?

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A second call to awareness stems from the covenant that we enter into at our Baptism, and which that we reaffirm liturgically throughout our lives as Christians: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" We answer: "I will, with God's help." Communities of belonging require, in a sense, that we share a particular vulnerability with each other. To be vulnerable is to let down our guards; to expose our hearts with the assurance that they will be handled with reverence and care. This does not mean that accidents will never happen and that our hearts won't be injured or even broken. What it does mean, hopefully, is that our hearts will be handled with the intention of care and respect. Taking part in an intentional community presupposes that we will do the same with the hearts of those who form that community with us. I am always struck by the passage in the third chapter of the epistle of James: "For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

We're all made in the image of God and, through our Baptisms, we have been joined one to another as children of God; we are called to let that identity guide us, in moments of conflict, towards words that uphold the dignity of one another. I recall a time when I was in a particular state of anxiety about a disagreement with someone and was having trouble viewing that person compassionately. I was worried about an upcoming difficult conversation, and didn't have high hopes for it ending amicably. My spiritual director said something that was a great help and has served me well many times since. They said: "When you sit down together, begin with a prayer and know that Jesus is in the room with you both. As you proceed with the conversation, be aware of God's presence and then ask yourselves, 'What does Jesus want for the both of you at the outcome?'"

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Forgiveness and reconciliation do not necessarily require resolution, but they do require empathy, compassion, respect, and dignity, which should help to forge a path forward. Disagreement doesn't have to lead to estrangement—which is too easy to forget when we are experiencing intense feelings and emotions. The key is to recognize each other's willingness to be vulnerable and to work out the source of tension together in a safe atmosphere.

Sometimes, to create a safe atmosphere, it may be helpful to have a facilitator join you. If it's agreeable, ask someone else to listen and guide your conversation with the goal of helping you both reach a dignified solution. We need to foster a safe environment in which we can see each other's wounds and then mutually salve them for healing.

Third, recognize that it's okay to be angry. The visceral experience of anger is not an enjoyable one, but it is necessary, especially in the face of injustice (whether our own or that of another). Being angry is not itself a sin, but how we deal with and entertain that anger is what can potentially lead to sin. If our anger leads us to a place of vengeance and retribution, then it is probable that we're in murky waters. But is it also possible that

our anger could lead us toward a grace-filled resolution and healing?

In this book *Self Discipline*, an early member of our community, Fr. Arthur Hall SSJE, points out that Jesus experienced the full array of emotions in his humanity that we do—and this includes anger. Yet, Jesus shows us the proper handling of anger through his example. Take this scene in the gospel of Mark:

Again, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to good or to do harm on the sabbath; to save a life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

In Jesus' example, we see that his anger led to healing and wholeness, rather than to fear, shame, or retribution. First, we acknowledge that we are angry, and then we need to think how that anger can be used constructively for the betterment of all involved, rather than for destruction. If we can practice this locally, in our one-on-one relationships, it is possible that we could begin to learn to do this more fully on a societal level as well.

I have to admit that I am far from perfect in employing the strategies mentioned above. Sometimes, my brakes fail and I have to approach my colleague, friend, Brother and say, "I'm sorry. I ask for your forgiveness. Could we press the reset button and begin again?" The cure to my instinct to flee the scene is instead to stay put: to approach the other with humility, to acknowledge lessons learned, and to ask to begin afresh.

The ancient monastic teaching around stability advises that, as long as a safe environment has been fostered, we must stay grounded at the source of our pain, to work through our differences, so that any breach may be healed. We have to remember that Jesus is God Emmanuel - which means "God with us." What does Jesus want for those who are engaged in conflict? Healing and wholeness. He teaches us to stay. And we can know that he stays with us.

# For Further Reflection

What examples of conflict and conflict resolution did you have growing up? How did they shape the way you deal with conflict now?

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Faced with threat, are you more prone to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn? Why is that?

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What helps you strengthen your own "breaks"?

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