

Keeping Conflict in Perspective

***I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you.***

– Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

A friend told me about a conflict she was having with her next door neighbor. Because of a misunderstanding, the neighbor was pretty upset, so much so that when they passed on the street and my friend said hello and reached out to shake hands, he withdrew his. He avoided eye contact, muttered a monotone “hi,” and quickly walked past her.

She felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. Stunned, she walked back to her house wondering what had just happened. It was even more upsetting because she had communicated with this man about the confusion that had initially caused the conflict, and she thought he understood her point of view. She wanted to find out what went wrong, but he clearly didn't want to discuss it. We talked about the incident for a while, brainstorming strategies that would help her deal with this unexpected blow, but eventually I left her to think it over on her own.

***You'll get mixed up, of course,
as you already know.
You'll get mixed up
with many strange birds as you go.***

– Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

Surprise Attack

A surprise attack is one of the hardest conflicts to handle. It's a shock to the system. Often the first reaction (after your heartbeat returns to normal) is to blame the other person or yourself and to get caught in endless internal dialogue about who's at fault and what to do next.

Regardless of the cause, a troubling conflict may take time to resolve and can disrupt life while it's going on. In the confusion, we lose our center and often operate on half-power, the other half working non-stop to figure out where to assign blame and (as much as possible) to justify our actions. It can be so disturbing that we lose focus, have difficulty making even routine decisions, and spend wakeful nights deliberating over the best way to solve the problem. It's hard to do anything wholeheartedly until the conflict is resolved.

I felt a lot of empathy for my friend with the disgruntled neighbor. I've been there, and it's no fun. One of the ways I tried to help was to listen when she needed to talk. I also suggested she take care of herself while trying to untangle

this knotty situation. Conflict is hard on the body, on the mind, and on the spirit, especially when it catches you by surprise. In his book, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Robert Sapolsky gives clear evidence and many examples of the effects of stress on the cardiovascular, digestive, and immune systems, as well as its connection with depression, personality, and temperament. Activation of the stress response releases numerous hormones that affect our ability to eat, sleep, think, speak, work, rest, and suppress disease.

How can you prepare when you don't know the conflict is coming? And how can you regain your inner and outer balance?

***So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's
a Great Balancing Act.***

— Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

You're on the Mat, Now What?

As you go through your daily activities, employ these mental and physical strategies to help restore perspective, reduce your body's stress response, and move the conflict toward a positive resolution.

- **Breathe and center.** Often. A conflict can unbalance us with strong emotions and feelings of unworthiness, anger, sadness, and frustration. Don't avoid your emotions, but treat them as guides. Appreciate and observe them as you

might observe a play. There is a lot of power in this emotional energy, and as you breathe, center, and watch, you'll discover how to use your emotions in a way that is in line with your best purpose.

- **Take the long view.** It's so easy to get caught in the turmoil of the conflict that we forget there will be a tomorrow. Take some quiet moments to close your eyes and see yourself in the future with the conflict resolved. Imagine how you'll feel with the problem behind you. What would you like the relationship to look like a month from now? A year from now? Meanwhile, eat well, go to bed at regular hours, laugh, and allow yourself to forget the problem occasionally. This may not be easy, but it's effective. Allow your inner wisdom to work silently while you continue to engage in life.
- **Reframe.** Step outside the conflict momentarily and look at it through a more objective lens. Instead of resisting, ask yourself if there is a gift here—an invitation to look at things differently or to try a new behavior. Acknowledge the other person by standing in his shoes. Why is he behaving this way? What does he want? How would you feel in his position?
- **Experiment.** Brainstorm all possible responses to this situation and try them on for size. Ask a friend to role-play alternatives you think you'd never choose because they're so unlike your usual persona. Have fun exercising unexplored selves.
- **Practice.** Choose one new behavior that will make a positive difference in your attitude toward life and make a commitment to practice that behavior everyday.

- **Count your blessings.** Notice the good things in your life. Cultivate gratitude and wonder.

Conflict can cause us to lose sight of the big picture—of what we truly want in life, why we're here, and what is important in a particular relationship—or to see it more clearly. Get on the mat and engage the conflict energy. Work with it and move it in a positive, useful direction. Meeting life in this way is the key to finding your true power.

***And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)***

—Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

After brainstorming many options, my friend decided to write a letter to her neighbor. She refrained from justifying her own actions. Instead, she acknowledged his feelings and offered to talk with him about the situation. Her letter opened up a renewed conversation and, over time, they came to be good neighbors again.



PRACTICE

What happens to you physically and emotionally
when you're surprised by conflict?

How do you usually behave, and how is it different
from what you would like to do?

Recall the last time you experienced
this kind of "surprise attack."

How did you handle it?

What did you do well?

What might you have done differently?

What next steps will you take?

SCOTT'S STORY

Last summer, my father and I had a big fight. I had just finished spending a weeklong vacation with friends at our summer cottage. At the end of the week, we were cleaning the cottage when Dad showed up. He was very angry and accused my friends and me of dumping garbage up the road instead of taking it with us. I tried to explain that it wasn't our garbage, but Dad wouldn't listen and screamed at me in front of my friends.

It's amazing how quickly a middle-aged man turns into an angry teenager when old wounds are reopened.

I barely spoke to my father for several months. When he did call, I was terse and ended our conversations as quickly as possible. I could not let go of my anger and embarrassment. I felt that if I gave in, I would be justifying my father's actions.

Then I remembered your advice about getting close to the conflict. The next time my father called, I told him why I had been short with him the past few months. I explained why I was upset: his refusal to believe the truth, his decision to embarrass me in front of my friends, and his refusal to listen to me at all.

My father listened and apologized. I'm not going to say that this was the first time he ever said he was sorry, but it was close. Our relationship has continued to improve since then.

About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, containing stories and practices on conflict, communication, and living a more powerful life. She is the founder of Power & Presence Training and chief instructor of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH, USA. Purchase *Unlikely Teachers* or sign up for Judy's free monthly tips and articles at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>.

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