

PEACE & CO-EXISTENCE

Honoring Our Diversity



*I have a dream that my four children will one day
live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color
of their skin but by the content of their character.*

—REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

The human family is wildly, delightfully diverse. We come in a huge variety of sizes, shapes, and colors. Our religions and belief systems, our cultures and traditions, our languages and lifestyles, even our geographical challenges and adaptations, are rich in their differences.

For whatever reason, these differences have become reasons to fight with each other or to claim superiority and power. We divide ourselves along the lines of our differences, seeing ourselves as the center of all that is good and right and everyone else as “the other.” At their deepest,

these divisions are expressed as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other rigid walls of hatred, discrimination, and fear.

If we're truly going to live at peace in our local and global communities, we need to get over these arbitrary divisions and learn to live together in harmony. We will have to remember that our unity as a single family of life on this Earth, and our wonderful diversity within that unity, are but two sides of the same coin. We are one, and we are many. When our intergroup relationships express this truth, we have laid a strong foundation for the culture of peace.

46 CELEBRATE THE DIFFERENCES

Anyone reading this right now who is a woman, stand up. If you are more than forty years old, stand up. If you are a Buddhist, stand up. If you are more than six feet tall, stand up.

Stand up if you are gay or lesbian. Stand up if you are of Asian heritage. If you speak Spanish, stand up. If you celebrate Kwanza, stand up. If you are of mixed racial or ethnic background, stand up. Stand up if you have never seen snow.

If you have completed high school, stand up. If you have children, stand up. Stand up if you are adopted. Stand up if you are not currently employed outside the home. Stand up if you earn more than \$100,000 per year. If you believe in God, stand up. If you recycle your newspapers, stand up. If you would like to lose weight, stand up.

How many times did you stand up? Do you know at least one person who could stand up for each of these categories? Would you like to?

Each of these "categories" represents some of our differences as human beings. There are thousands, perhaps millions, of possible categories. Some of them are inherited traits that we cannot change; some are matters of choice and preference; some are more important to our sense of identity than others; some are very private matters.

You have a choice about how you relate to the people who didn't stand up when you did. You can see them as "other," or you can see them as like yourself but a little different. Maybe someone would not

stand when you did on one question, but would on five others. When does that difference matter to you, and why?

If you would celebrate all the variety of who we are, start with yourself. Can you appreciate and honor your many selves—all the times you stood up, and the times you didn't? Now can you do that with others?

47 GO BEYOND STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES

A recent survey in the United States on views about the Middle East peace process showed that nearly 90 percent of respondents associated the word *terrorist* with the word *Arab*. This is an example of a vicious and prejudicial stereotype, a rigid perception that lumps everyone in a single group with a supposed common trait.

Our prejudices make it impossible for us to live together in peace, because they keep us from seeing each other as we really are. Because we live in a society where our differences separate us, we all carry distorted views of those with identities other than our own. Our work for peace is to learn to get beyond these distortions and see the beauty in each and every member of the human family.

- Pick one category mentioned in the exercise for which you did not stand up (or a category that was not mentioned at all) and about which you have strong feelings. List honestly your beliefs and assumptions about people in that category. Where did you learn those beliefs?
- Seek out some people of that category. Make an effort to get to know them as individuals, as real and complex human beings. (This takes courage, and maybe a bit of ingenuity to find them and make contact. You can do it.) What happens to the beliefs about them you started with?
- Pick one category in the exercise for which you did stand up, or one aspect of your identity of which you feel particularly proud. What stereotypes and prejudices do you think others may hold about people like you? To what extent are they true or not true about you? How might you re-educate those who hold these negative views?

48 PRACTICE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Nearly every interaction we have with another person is some kind of cross-cultural communication. That is because our great diversity means that we have different beliefs, values, and assumptions. Even among men and women of the same ethnic group, age range, and religion, there can be enough distinction to require particular care in communicating.

Cross-cultural communication means that we take care to speak and act in ways that will not offend someone who is different from us, and that will ensure that what we say can be understood.

- Be sensitive to obvious differences of language, tradition, or religion. Be aware of words or actions that would clearly offend someone else (example: swearing in front of a devoutly religious person).
- Pay attention to the invisible differences that might make communication difficult. You cannot assume that people who look like you actually think like you. People have different expectations about time, touching, personal space, eye contact. What's comfortable for you may not be so for others.
- Take your cues from the other person. If they look you directly in the eye, you can probably safely do the same. If they shake hands, don't offer to hug. If they turn every personal question aside, don't keep asking.
- Be curious with people from cultures very different from your own. Admit your ignorance about their ways, and ask to be educated. Apologize in advance for any errors in etiquette you might make from your ignorance.
- Get the hint. If someone acts in a way that you consider strange or inappropriate, realize there may be significant cultural differences, rather than assume they are weird or stupid.

49 SEE YOURSELF AS THE OTHER

Often when we relate to people different than ourselves, we exaggerate the distinctions. We put all the "strangeness" in them, and all the

"normalcy" in us. We need to be able to reach across that chasm and re-establish ourselves as sharing a common humanity.

We need to be able to look in the mirror and see the other as ourselves. We also need to be able to put ourselves in the shoes of the other, to understand how things look from their point of view.

- Think of another category of people whom you experience as "the other."
- Make a list of all the ways they are different from you. Now take each item on that list and apply it to yourself. See if it fits, even a little bit.
- Now make another list of all the ways they are the same as or similar to you. What do you notice?
- Set aside one hour of an average day in your life, and during that hour imagine that you are someone from that other category. How would your life be different in that hour?
- Think of a difficult situation you experienced or witnessed involving someone from an identity group different from yours. Tell the story of what happened. Now tell it from their likely point of view.
- Think of a story, myth, or legend that celebrates some victory of your group against another. How do you think people in that other group might feel when they hear your version of that victory? Now think of a story, myth, or legend that mourns a defeat of your group at the hands of another. How do you think the other group might tell this story to its children? What do you learn from this?

50 REBALANCE THE POWER EQUATION

In relationships between groups of people, usually one group has more power or privilege than another. Most power relations are based on an assumption of what is called a "zero-sum game." That means, if I have more, you must have less. Or they are acted out in a dominant-subordinate relationship, where the stronger side controls the weaker.

These formulas will always create tension and conflict, because generally people do not enjoy feeling “one down” while another is “one up.” To build a culture of peace in our intergroup relations, we need to find creative ways for all to feel powerful.

- Think of a group that has more power (prestige or privilege) in society than a group you are associated with (example: men or women; adults or children; Protestants or Jews). Make a list of the ways that power is demonstrated.
- Think of a group that has less power (prestige or privilege) in society than a group you are associated with. Make a list of the ways that powerlessness is demonstrated.
- Now make a list of all the things that the more powerful group could do to equalize the power equation. What could the less powerful group do? How could this happen without creating greater conflict, or without reversing places so that the ones on top become the ones on the bottom?
- Think of situations you know about where the power balance was successfully restored after being severely tipped to favor one side. How did it happen? What lessons can you draw from that experience that you could use in your own relations with people from other groups?

51 PRACTICE CO-CREATIVITY

One of the ways to experience equal power is to be creative together in solving shared problems. Co-creativity has two elements: *co*, meaning together, with each other; and *creativity*, meaning the ability to generate new ideas and possibilities for action.

The “together” part requires that we make contact with people who are different from us and establish ways for working together. The “creativity” part requires that we activate that part of our brains that is able to be imaginative, intuitive, and full of wonder and awe.

- Find or create a situation where you can work with people from another group on issues that concern you both. It may be issues about your relationship, or it may be other issues that both groups have some interest in.

- Before you address the problem or issue you are concerned with, take some time to warm up your creative juices.
- Together, learn and practice the process of brainstorming, where as a group you throw out as many ideas as possible on a particular subject, without judging or discussing anything until a large list has been made. People are invited to piggy-back on each other's ideas, to make silly and outrageous suggestions, and to aim for quantity, not quality.
- Try other creative exercises. Practice the “rule of seven,” where for every problem each person must come up with seven suggestions. Compare your lists to see how many good ideas came from the group as a whole. Or, practice seeing a familiar object in an unfamiliar way. For instance, turn a chair over and name, together, all the things it could be.
- Now that your creative juices are flowing, apply that openness to a real problem, working together as a group to find creative solutions to familiar difficulties.

52 ENGAGE IN HONEST CONVERSATION

Even with all our goodwill for co-existence and the honoring of diversity, there can be real obstacles to good intergroup relations. Many of them come from painful history that has never been healed or resolved. Others come from continuing structures and norms in society that make it difficult to sustain equality and fairness.

Even if we can't cure all the ills and resolve all the distrust and animosity that may have built up over time, we can at least begin by being honest with each other about what the obstacles are. This is a good place to start.

- Convene or participate in intergroup dialogues (interfaith, interracial, inter-ethnic, intergenerational). Bring in a facilitator to help the group if the topics are too hot to handle on your own. Commit to an ongoing process.
- Be willing to have an honest conversation. Let yourselves look at the hard places as they truly are. No need to run away, make it

seem better than it is, or pretend there is an easy fix. Just be fully present to the truth of each side's experience.

- Acknowledge the need for healing and reconciliation where there has been pain and suffering. (The next chapter will go into more detail about how to do this.)
- Develop confidence-building measures. Find small things that each side can do, separately or together, to increase trust and improve confidence. Move beyond words to practical actions. See if, and how, this changes the conversation.

53 HELP THEM TO HELP YOU

In our search for co-existence, we often have unrealistic expectations that the other group will meet our needs once we tell them where we stand. It doesn't work that way. They are busy putting forward their needs and positions and expecting us to satisfy them.

To make progress in being a peace-able community, we have to help others help us to get our interests met. We have to make it easy and attractive for them to meet us halfway. We have to find a way to assure them that by being more friendly with us, they are not losing but gaining.

- Be inviting. In informal interactions and more formal dialogues, forgo the urge to be critical and negative. Instead, keep the door open to harmonious relations. Let others know that you're interested in moving forward, in improving the relationship.
- Go step by step. Don't try to do too much at one time. Relationships that have been difficult for some time will take time to change. Take simple action steps that have a high likelihood of success. In that way, confidence builds.
- Help everyone save face. Saving "face" means being able to feel respected, to walk with dignity. To change, to compromise a long-standing position, to make a new start, we must be able to move forward without humiliation, shame, or guilt. Offer suggestions that are easy for others to say "Yes" to; suggestions where everyone can feel and look good.

- Give and seek information. Ask, "What would it take to move this relationship to a better place?" Share the same information from your point of view. Take as much time as you need to gather as much information as necessary, so you can address the real issues successfully.

54 PLAY TOGETHER

One of the best ways to break the distrust and hostility that can build between groups is to move away from the hard issues into a social mode. While we might not agree on ideological issues, or on the painful parts of our history, we can enjoy a meal together.

Play is a way of connecting with the core of our shared human experience. Laughter, fun, relaxation, and joy can bring people together in the heart, where our oneness transcends our differences. We all want to be happy. Finding ways to be happy together can build strong bridges over even the deepest canyons.

- Organize picnics. A picnic is a great way to be together informally. In many cultures, sharing food is an act of friendship. Being outdoors, where people can play games and move around, promotes a sense of ease and possibility.
- Do sports activities together. More formal than a picnic, sports provide a direct avenue for relating. If the chosen sport is a team sport, used mixed teams as a way of diffusing the intergroup rivalries and demonstrating that the groups can indeed work together.
- Celebrate each other's holidays. Invite people from another group to join you in a holiday special to your people. By sharing our culture—with all the rituals, music, food, and drink that are often part of holiday cheer—we help break down stereotypes and build a sense of familiarity.
- Bring the children together. Nothing builds a sense of community faster than seeing children together. Children do not naturally carry the fears, prejudices, or historical wounds of our intergroup relations (unless we adults have taught them to), so they are happy to play and laugh and make new friends. That can pave the way for the parents to make new friends too.



REVIEW

Practice the Four Principles of Peace and Co-Existence

COMMUNITY

Celebrate our differences in order to honor our unity.

COOPERATION

Use co-creativity to address
intergroup difficulties more effectively.

NONVIOLENCE

Engage in honest conversation about the
obstacles in the relationship, and build trust.

WITNESS

Honor the humanity of all through play and laughter.



CONFRONTING RACISM, TOGETHER

Racism is a particularly deep and ongoing wound in U.S. society. It is difficult for well-meaning white people, especially, to acknowledge their collusion with racism. This story tells about a courageous moment in an interfaith, interracial dialogue when blacks and whites together could break the ice of formality and begin a meaningful and honest conversation.

That the congregation at my synagogue was all white goes without saying. When our new rabbi suggested an interfaith dialogue with an all-black church from another part of town, we welcomed the opportunity to expand our horizons.

The meetings went well at first, but were, frankly, rather bland. No one wanted to say anything to offend the others. Everyone outdid themselves showing hospitality and courtesy. We certainly didn't think we were racist in any way, and wanted to make sure our new friends understood that.

The first crack in the foundation appeared when we made our first visit to their church. We were invited to sit in on a Bible study class one evening. Quietly, among ourselves, we wondered if it was safe to go to that neighborhood at night, and we made sure we traveled in groups. Then we felt guilty about being scared—did that mean we were racist?

At the next meeting, one man from the church asked a difficult question: What was your first experience with an African American person? I remembered Betty, the maid who worked for us when I was a child. Soon it became evident that many of us in the congregation met the black community first through our maids. When the second, then the third person admitted that, it got very awkward. With the fourth person, the tension rose to an almost unbearable level. By the time the fifth person said, "Me too," somehow that broke down the wall, and there was nothing to do but laugh that ironic laugh that says, "Oh yeah, that's how it is." In that moment we saw laid bare before us the pervasive poison of racism, and how we were all damaged by it in different ways. That was the moment the long journey of healing could begin.