

bread for the journey

The opposition

Not long ago, a father said to his daughter during a group session, "Try to remember I am not your enemy."

When you think about it, why is it necessary for a parent to remind a child, "I am not your enemy?" Why is the "other" perceived as the "opposite" as in opposition? What makes it necessary for Sox fans to curse Cub fans and vice-versa? What's with the Protestant/Catholic tension in Ireland—or the volatility in the rest of the world? The age-old battle between extremists in both the Muslim and Christian worlds is tiresome and insufferably tragic.

One of the oldest stories on record is a story of polar opposites. Cain and Abel are brothers. For some inexplicable reason, Cain took after his brother. It was the old, familiar, "Mine is better than yours" or "I am Daddy's favorite" conflict. Moments before Cain struck the fatal blow, he realized he had a choice: he could lay down his weapon and make peace with his brother or he could follow through with his intention to kill. Cain chose the latter. Ever since, human relationships have been characterized by conflict and deadly competition.

The Birmingham News retold a story about what happened in the spring of 1965 to the first African-American girl to integrate Jones Valley High School in that town: "Carolyn spent all day getting ready for her big prom night. Then she and her date drove toward the high school gym. When they turned the corner,

they discovered the gymnasium was dark and empty. The prom's planning committee had kept the location of the Jones Valley High prom a secret so Carolyn could not attend."

Phoebe Prince, freshman, hung herself in a stairwell of her parent's Hadley, Massachusetts apartment after being relentlessly bullied and taunted by classmates for an entire semester.

The stories of Cain and Abel, Phoebe and her classmates, Carolyn and the prom planners illustrate the *apparent* reasons why people seem bent toward opposing each other: it is all about foolishness, bigotry, and hatred. But *apparent* reasons don't get to the bottom of why people tend to stand in opposition to one another.

Why does half the world hunger and thirst in a world of plenty?
Why does one nation threaten to drop bombs on another?
Why do husbands and wives fight and eventually split?
Why is there such a divide between the addict and non-addict world?
Why do God-believers argue so vehemently with God-deniers?
Why do disagreements devolve into violence?
Why do so many kids "hate" anyone in authority over them?
Why are resentments so long-standing, and why is it so difficult to forgive?
Or, as old Rodney King pleaded in March of '91, "Can't we all just get along?"

It is one thing to disagree with one another. It is one thing to try to beat your opponent in a game of Scrabble. It is one thing to negotiate differences before the contract is signed. But it is quite another to find it necessary to beat your opponent into the ground, smash him senseless, and reduce him to ashes. Why so much hatred and violence?

(continued on back)


Here are a few plausible explanations.

First, it's an *image* issue—a self-esteem problem. We naturally tend to think we are less than the other guy. Cain reduced Abel to rubble because Cain *thought or felt* he did not measure up to some invisible and unexpressed standard of what he thought God wanted him to do or be. It had nothing to do with the product he brought to the table. Small-minded, ego-driven folks feel they must beat the opposition to a pulp in order to inflate their own deflated ego. Bullies are self-esteem deprived cowards.

Second, it is a *territorial* issue. If one of my cats occupies the chair, the other one wants it. "Asia" cannot tolerate the contentedness of "Dorian Gray" on the seat in the sun by the window. We want what we don't have. One of the least-known and lesser-regarded commandments in the moral law is the one addressing covetousness; yet, covetousness is the engine that drives disobedience to the other nine. I want my neighbor's stuff; therefore, I will lie, cheat, steal, or kill to get it. Poor Phoebe Prince was beautiful and therefore was perceived as a powerful threat by her peers. She dated the star quarterback of the football team. Besides, she was new to the school. This could

never happen. And it didn't. Not for long. By their brutality and bullying, they were able to get Phoebe out of their way.

Third, it is a *control* issue. The ones in power make the rules and the winners write history. We are in opposition to one another because we do not want to submit or lose to the other person's power. Galileo found out the hard way. As a poor scientist, his view of the world could not hold a candle to the power of the pope. Whether the sun revolved around the earth or the earth revolved around the sun was a matter determined by who was in charge of doing the science—religion or research. Then and there it was religion, not research.

Learning to handle the opposition well is a matter of life and death in recovery. This is why contentment trumps covetousness, why resentments are hindrances to wellness, and why making amends with "enemies" is essential for lasting recovery. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance Treatment Centers. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with addictions. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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