FEAR OF THE OTHER

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A minister and civil rights activist in Alabama, my father was raised in a family in which equality and love of the stranger were valued. Yet he grew up in the deep South of Alabama in the 1920's and 1930's. His father, a minister also, and mother had taught him that all people were God's children and that we were all brothers and sisters in God's care. In contrast, segregation and racial tension were very real in his childhood world.

While he was familiar with the concept of the brotherhood of all people, he had very little experience after puberty with his African-American neighbors as peers. Once as a young man in theological school, he ate a meal with African American students at a conference and became anxious and physically sick. He did not understand what was happening to him. His disease was the "fear of the other" that infected even those of good will who had still not had much experience or interaction as peers with African Americans in the segregated South.

Within one-fourth of a second we judge a situation to be "positive" or "negative", "safe" or "dangerous." This evaluative function resides deep within the human brain, serving humans for thousands of years to keep us alive. This part of our brain keeps us vigilant against danger that would destroy us physically or emotionally. In my work with couples we call this the old brain, composed of the brain stem and the midbrain or limbic system. This part of our brain functions mostly without our being aware of it.

We tend to judge that with which we are familiar as positive or safe. We often see that which is like us as positive and normal. We see the way we do things personally or culturally as the way it should be done. We often see our values as the values others should adopt. At an instinctual level, I as a Caucasian, American male judge it better to be a male than a female, to be Caucasian than of color, to be American than from any other culture. My nephew illustrated the naturalness of this posture in his childlike exuberance when we were riding in a boat one summer. "You know, Uncle Louis," he said, "If you ain't a McLeod, you ain't nothing!"

Deep in the human experience is an innate fear or suspicion of that which is different or unfamiliar. We also experience people with whom we are in conflict as "dangerous" to some degree. The partner or spouse with whom I have great feelings of love becomes an adversary when we enter the repetitive arguments of our relationship. The political opponent becomes wrong and we can acknowledge absolutely no virtue in his platform while my party has the right answers for the country's ills. Some people see their religion as the only way. They believe their way of perceiving God and how to live a righteous, spiritual life is the only way. Certainly, in today's world many in the United States who know little of Islam may perceive its Muslim followers as dangerous in light of September 11.

Theologian Paul Mendes-Flohr, writing about the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's vision of how the I-Thou encounter could effect the hostilities between Israel and the

Palestinians, describes Buber's vision of "a radically new mode of discourse." According to Mendes-Flor, Buber thought that the Jews and Palestinians must "tell their respective tales—relating their history, with all its woes and hopes . . . while acknowledging and compassionately confirming the tale of the other." This dialogue would acknowledge "that the other who confronts us, who 'encroaches' upon our life, also has a tale, a story perhaps no less compelling, certainly no less real, than one's own to tell." This dialogue would have the effect of transforming the perception of the "enemy" into a "person with a name," creating the possibility of the I-Thou relationship of which Buber wrote.

In our own culture, how do we create the conditions conducive to transforming the "other who is different from ourselves" into the friend or partner who has much the same yearnings for safety, connection and growth as we do? How can we move beyond tolerance to acceptance?

Experience and research suggest that these fears are difficult to change or diminish. In my own life having a personal experience with someone who is different from me has facilitated this process. As a teen-ager in the segregated South, I was a camp counselor with an African American peer. He became Robert Clardy, my friend, instead of the strange guy from the other side of the tracks. I visited the Soviet Union in 1968, during the height of the Cold War and met Communists who were hated in my own homeland. However, as I came to know our Russian guide, Tamela, personally as well as some other Russian students, I realized that we were much more alike than different.

We became family with no distinctions as we saw strangers help each other at the World Trade Center. This temporary suspension of our separateness will fade unless we take this opportunity to become neighbors and family with the "other" who is different from us. Actively seeking opportunities to encounter those who are different from us, the "Other" to us, in a personal way may provide an opening. Sharing a meal together, working on a project together, attending a different religious service or sharing some other personal experience may transform one's perception of the "Other" into someone with whom an I-Thou relationship is , indeed, possible and desirable.

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