

# I Can Relate!

By Louise Phipps Senft

The monthly missalette on Relational Practice

## I have a Dream....

Inspired by the late Martin Luther King, Jr, whose life we remembered last month, 50 years after he was assassinated, I have been thinking deeply about Relational Practices and how Dr. King's message and life was a model of being relational. Dr. King stirred us with his words, "Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities, which have surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. This does not mean that we abandon our righteous efforts...But we shall not, in the process, relinquish our privilege and obligation to love...This is the only way to create beloved communities."

Imagine that, one of the greatest leaders the US has known spoke of the only way to save mankind is to love. It's as haunting a statement as "Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities." What did he mean to love? Stated most plainly, he left us with a challenge that we might be more conscious, that we might think and act in ways that are more aware of human impact for good rather than suffering, to disagree and work towards what we believe in, but never at the expense of human dignity and life, that we might strive ever for what is good for the whole, for both the powerful and the marginalized. For all.

His invitation to follow another way is timeless. It is now. I want to accept that invitation and invite you to join me. Here is one way for each of us, as dispute resolution professionals, and as human beings, to take up Dr. King's challenge, which is a relational challenge.

Daily, weekly, we all encounter *Tribe Think*. I'm speaking of the kind of thinking we join with that gains its momentum by opposing another person or group that espouses a different point of view. The examples are myriad these days from politics to the environment to healthcare. I want to resist joining in tribe think and respond instead with the kind of strength that is strong enough to love.

Most of us find safety being connected to groups that we like with like-minded thinkers. I know I do, and I think of such groups as my tribes, and it feels good because I feel at ease with my tribes; we "get" each other. But it's especially when we are with our tribes that we must stay alert to those times when our tribes begin tribal-like thinking. You know, the kind of thinking that excludes divergent thought or ways or ideas, the kind of thinking that will not tolerate or even allow for the acknowledgment of an opposing view, the kind of thought that forgets how to be curious, how to be respectful, the kind of thought that is so narrow it shuts down and is no longer able to engage with others who are not part of the tribe, no longer able to be creative or to problem-solve with others outside the tribe, and often relying on drowning out the voices of those not in the tribe relying on shaming to ensure the prevailing tribe view stays prevailing. Tribe Think.

The *Adversarial Ethic* is alive and well with Tribe Think. It's easier to vilify and shame than to be open, inquiring and problem-solving. When you're caught up in Tribe Think, it's easier to hate than to love.

Dr. King was right about the other way. It takes moral courage every day for each of us to not perpetuate hatred and violence. It does. It's all around us. Yes, it can be a momentary release to rail against someone who opposes your views. Yes, it can feel good in the moment to join others in condemning someone or something that does not meet our standards. Before we realize it though, we can be swept into Tribe Think used as a weapon to amass a larger base of support, to gain more power for our own group, all at the expense of someone else or group. We can become pawns in an insidious phenomenon. Whenever we put down, marginalize, or demonize a person or a group, any person or group, we simply add to the clutter of the wreckage of our communities.

I don't want to add to the clutter of the wreckage of our communities. And I imagine you don't either. There is a different way to be, to negotiate, to advocate. A different way to hold differences. It's part of the Relational Practices movement. Dr. King laid out what is at the core of a relational way: it's a way of love. Are you strong enough to stand for something while also loving your opponent as a human being? Are you courageous enough to stand up for something while still respecting the dignity of your opponent?

I recently attended our ABA Dispute Resolution conference where Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) was our keynote speaker. He said President Trump had it right that we have an immigration problem. He said he disagreed on how to solve it and shared the details of some of the behind the scenes negotiations with the Problem Solving Caucus. The ABA crowd cheered his remarks about the Dreamers, but without getting caught up in that, he then stated that the wall the President wants to build spurred attention to a very real problem facing the US. I found it to be a brilliant shiny relational example, a courageous model of the kind of love Martin Luther King was urging us to do. Senator Kaine stood strong for his goals on behalf of the Dreamers; he also chose not to demonize his opponent. Indeed, he acknowledged his opponent's view and found something of value in it. And he was more effective as a result. He didn't lose his credibility or authority; he gained moral ground as a result of the way he chose, a way I believe MLK would have said was a way of love.

We must be vigilant and not allow our Tribe Think to be fueled by hatred. How might you respond when you realize you are getting sucked into Tribe Think? One simple powerful way is to allow for and be curious about dissenting opinions. Acknowledge them without spite. Invite them, especially if they are wildly different than the ones you like or agree with. Make room for them at your table, in your conversation, in your offices without vilifying, sneering, making fun of, or demeaning them. If those who espouse the view are not available, name the viewpoint, without disdain. It's ok to oppose the viewpoint. You may oppose vigorously, but not at the expense of the humanity behind the viewpoint. You may stand strong and with conviction for something, but not

in a way that annihilates the dignity of the other person or the group or incites violence and hatred against them.

And if you are in a law school, a way to bring love (a/k/a social justice) into any classroom would be to model it in the teaching method itself. Imagine law professors who had the moral courage to acknowledge minority political views, views that maybe no one in the school espoused, in respectful ways. To give voice to them without umbridge and disgust. Imagine law students who felt safe enough and had the courage to voice those other views and were not marginalized or made to feel small or stupid. In our current political climate, this may be especially hard. But we all have the fiber to do this on both sides of the equation. It's such a powerful antidote to hatred. It's a relational way.

What do you think about a Relational Approach? If you have any reactions or stories you'd like to share re this article, please send them to [Louise@BaltimoreMediation.com](mailto:Louise@BaltimoreMediation.com). Your views and stories are welcomed.

**Louise Phipps Senft** is a Chair of the Relational Practices Task Force and author of the best-seller, *Being Relational: The Seven Ways to Quality Interaction and Lasting Change* (HCI 2015). She is the founder of Baltimore Mediation (1993) and is an international mediator with a practice in catastrophic injury and complex business, divorce, and estate conflict. She is a nationally recognized trainer in relational theory and practice and transformative mediation.