



HARMONY IS HARD

(Humans Are Involved)

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It Sounded Like a Pretty Good Idea

Here was a concept simple enough I thought I might just be able to pull it off.

I chose to focus on one word throughout an entire year, a word I believed would sum up who I wanted to be and how I wanted to live.

I chose HARMONY. Here's why:

I realized I live with a lot of dissonance in my life and it was exhausting. The tracks that sometimes played in my head were anything but pleasing. Much of it was because I allowed flawed thinking to steal my joy and create friction in my relationships.

I found myself assuming I had to lower my expectations so I wouldn't be disappointed. I worried that if I didn't stand my ground, someone would take advantage of me. I had this peculiar notion that the poor choices I had made in the past created a rut so deep I was unlikely to get out of it, so I had resigned myself to "my lot".

In retrospect, it sounds truly awful, doesn't it? Yeah, I'm not proud of these negative thought patterns. What they are is agreements I allowed myself to make over the years that were flat out false. I'm not sure I was always even aware I was doing it. What I was sure of was that this way of thinking was not from God and was not a recipe for joy. I really wanted to change it.

I started thinking: Instead of letting these patterns dictate my approach to a given situation, what if I were to stop first and ask myself, "Do I know that to be true?" Then, "Is my response here going to create or destroy harmony in this relationship?" I believed my answers to those questions could change my outlook and my attitude.

- Maybe it was true that I had made some bad choices or that I had been taken advantage of in the past.
- Maybe I was justified in feeling defensive or disappointed in this situation.

Still, I realized that whatever circumstance I found myself in may not be a "hill I wanted to die on", i.e., it didn't violate my moral convictions, demean me or someone I love, or endanger personal or public safety. In that case, I had the option of a non-defensive response, a gracious response. I could reject the relentless drumbeat of dissonance that so often made me miserable and instead choose harmony with those around me. It seemed it would be a much more pleasing soundtrack for my life; so I gave it whirl.

I spent time really noticing how harmony could make a difference in my life and I think the lessons I learned are worth sharing.

The Question I Asked Myself

I won't lie. Harmony is hard.

It was like there was a conspiracy to keep my life noisy and dissonant, especially in my closest and most important relationships. It became clear to me after just a week how much opposition I would encounter in the average day once I decided to try and live a more peaceful life.

I opted to make the pursuit of harmony my goal for the year and the next thing I knew:

- the pork chops didn't pass the "test"
- the thermostat was set too high (or too low)
- I was told I was valuing the wrong things
- I was dismissed as not fully informed, therefore my opinion had no value
- the explanation I gave regarding (pick a topic) wasn't sufficient
- I asked one too many follow-up questions and now I was "accusing"

. . . and so it goes.

For me, it's easy to default to "Oh, what's the use?" and then check out emotionally. I know, that passive-aggressive response is frankly immature and does nothing to promote a healthy relationship.

So if I was going to achieve harmony, I needed to change that.

The only part of the equation I had any actual control over was my own response. Faced with a potential conflict or even just a challenging question, I had to take an extra half beat before I said or did anything and in that small pause, ask:

Is the response I'm about to give going to help or hurt this situation?

With that in mind, I could choose the non-harmonious reaction and accept the consequences (believe me, I sometimes did). I could exhale silently and let it go in the interest of peace-keeping. Or I could just reframe my response to be less incendiary.

Sometimes an issue IS worth fighting for and I'm not advocating "stuffing" the important things. Trust me, stuffing doesn't work for me, either. But more often than not, I was finding that a little self-control went a long way and the payoff of a less strident environment made up for relinquishing my "right" to be right.

But the pork chops? I died on that hill. And they weren't even worth it.

How Not to Achieve Harmony

The first clue is the muttering and swearing. It's 6:30 in the morning and the train will be arriving shortly. No one has an extra few minutes; we're all on autopilot, just trying to get to work as painlessly as possible.

The man ahead of me in line at the payment kiosk is now pounding the side of the machine and angrily accusing the Village officials who maintain the parking facility of everything from laziness to greed to criminal corruption.

My offer of a different dollar bill – maybe his was too wrinkled ... or not wrinkled enough? – doesn't even phase him.

*"It's not taking dollar bills. The *^\$#@ machine is broken and they don't care 'cause if you don't pay the fee, you're going to get a ticket for \$55 and that's more money in their pockets. Bunch of bums."*

Mind you, I don't make a habit of engaging in conversation with strangers first thing in the morning. (I purposely sit in the designated "quiet car" on the train to avoid it.) And I had already stepped in dog poop at 5:00 AM (in my house slippers!) before I even got to the coffee pot. So it's not like my day had got off to a stellar start.

But I walked to the next kiosk with Mr. Grumpy, about a block away, we were able to pay our fee, and on the way I learned a few things about him that changed my initial assumptions.

He was in pain. He was recovering from severe bronchitis and it had taken its toll. A fit of severe coughing the night before had cracked a couple of ribs and torn some muscles in his chest, sending him to the emergency room. He was there for hours. But here he was, trying to get to work because he had projects that had to be completed and he just couldn't take the day off.

As he talked, he became calmer, sharing how patient his wife was and how kind the medical personnel at the ER had been. He was glad to have a job and he was proud of a little device someone had given him that hung around his neck, designed to clean the air he was breathing. He held it up to show me.

Later, as the train pulled into the station in Chicago, Mr. Grumpy walked past my seat and quietly admonished me to "have yourself a good day". With a smile.

My thoughts returned to that man several times during the day and as they did, I gleaned a few insights from my encounter with him; lessons I needed to learn about how NOT to achieve harmony in my life on a given day.

- **Assume you know another's motives.** Mr. Grumpy was quick to believe that negligence and greed were behind the broken machine. He assumed the worst, took it personally and was about to let it ruin his day. And you know what? I was tempted to agree with him. I mean, it does kind of happen a lot when you commute on public transportation.
- **Depersonalize your nemesis.** "Bunch of bums" who "don't care", "worthless bureaucrats". He was convinced. I was just as guilty of depersonalizing this angry man trying to cram his dollar bill into the machine. I defaulted to believing he was yet another unhappy commuter to be avoided. But talking to him and learning a little about him, he became human.
- **Jump to conclusions.** They don't fix the equipment because they don't care? Maybe. But maybe they don't know the machine is broken; it could have happened just moments before we walked up. Stuff breaks. But I do the same thing, I jump to conclusions when I should really stop and ask myself, "Do I know that to be true?" In many cases, the answer is no.
- **Limit the possibilities.** Reducing alternatives to either/or certainly simplifies things, but the result may not be accurate. Mr. Grumpy ended up smiling and reflecting on some positives before the train arrived. (And we both successfully paid for our parking.) Could that have been the point? I needed to remind myself that whatever the inconvenience or conflict I was currently engaged in, it may have been meant for another purpose than just to irritate me.
- **Stay in your isolation bubble.** I had stood next to Mr. Grumpy for months on the train platform in the dark and cold, never once engaging with him on a human level. Now I saw him - and myself - differently.

As a Christian, I believe God is always about refining my character and giving me opportunities to grow, even through the negative events. If I look for other possibilities and positives in the situation, I might actually see His hand and experience more harmony in my life.

But please don't take this as an open invitation to talk to me when I'm in commuter zombie mode. I'm on that quiet car for a reason. :-)

Some Pretty Sneaky Harmony-Busting Behaviors

As I continued my focus on the word “harmony”, I noticed other behaviors that *looked* like harmony-producers but in reality were harmony-busters. They seemed innocuous enough, perhaps even helpful in some situations. But over time, I saw how harmful they could be and how, in the long run, they did more harm than good.

Here are a few I observed. Maybe you can think of others:

- **Pain-avoidance:** The friend whose brother is snarky to her for reasons she has not figured out. He competes with her in every arena, no matter how small or unimportant. He baits her to get a strong reaction and then if she responds, he belittles her in front of others. If she is with him and manages not to break any of the eggshells she’s walking on, she is relieved. *But that’s not harmony.*
- **Politeness:** The group of women who have shared their lives for years, but lately have become sloppy about their relationships. They show up late for scheduled get-togethers or even back out at the last minute. If they say they’ll do something to prepare for the next meeting, maybe they will, maybe they won’t. They sometimes miss an opportunity to be supportive of each other in a crisis because life is just too busy. They think they’re doing the loving thing by not mentioning this growing carelessness, *but that’s not harmony.*
- **Passive-aggressiveness:** The husband who is weary of arguing with his wife about every little thing. She longs for him to engage with her and he rankles at what he perceives as her neediness. He takes on extra projects at work and then joins a fitness center “to lose some weight and get in shape”. If challenged, he says he’s just keeping the peace. After all, if he’s not home, they can’t argue. *But that’s not harmony.*
- **Placating:** The roommate who hates conflict, so she lets the others she lives with leave a mess in the kitchen every night and skip their turn at cleaning the common areas. She figures if she’s the one it bothers, she should be the one who handles it. Lately, she has had to pick up the slack on delinquent utility bills and make sure the rent is paid on time, even though she has to front the money herself. She’s “going along to get along” but it’s really starting to bug her. *And that’s not harmony.*

Sometimes we kid ourselves. We get really busy so we won’t have to deal with the deeper relational issues; we put on a mask of politeness and pretend things are fine; we even clench our jaw and do stuff we’d really rather not.

And we think we’re doing it all in the pursuit of harmony.

Politicians call this “kicking the can down the road” – we get through it for now, but we’re going to pay later.

That wasn't the kind of harmony I was looking for, how about you?

On a Scale of "One-to-Larry"

I spent what seemed like a lifetime sharing a ride to the office with a very extroverted coworker awhile back.

I think I may have mentioned to you before that even after several cups of coffee, I'm still not – shall we say – “bubbly” first thing in the morning? Yet, as soon as I got in the car with him, he was “on”. Hoping he would take a hint, I remember saying the very first day, “Gee, Larry [not his real name], you're kind of a morning person, aren't you?”

His response: “Yes! I AM a morning person! And I'm an afternoon person! And I'm an evening person! I'm an ALL DAY person!”

Oh dear.

We only commuted together for a couple of weeks, but during that time, my definition of intense took on a whole new dimension. Even now I measure intensity on a scale of “One-to-Larry”. I haven't seen him in a number of years and I've often wondered if he spontaneously combusted somewhere along the way.

Seriously, though, in my ongoing attempt to seek harmony in my life, I find intense people to be a real challenge. And I don't mean just first thing in the morning.

- If I'm in a restaurant with a small group of people (say, six or less), I prefer one conversation at the table, if at all possible. I don't want to be pulled into a side conversation by whoever is the “Larry” in the crowd and miss interacting with the others.
- If I know I'll be spending time in the company of a conversation hog, my tendency is to immediately start thinking of how I can cut my time with them short. How can I get away (or not sit next to them)? How can I not go in the first place?

But here's what I came to realize about Larry and I think it applies to others who tend toward that end of the spectrum.

Larry didn't mind being told he needed to dial it back a notch. He wasn't overly sensitive so I didn't have to be particularly subtle. I'm not sure he picked up on body language (if he did, he either misinterpreted it or chose to ignore it) but really, offending him was almost impossible.

“*Give it a rest, would ya?*” didn't make him sulk or write me off; it made him laugh. And then he would actually try to settle down. Of course, it didn't last long, because – well – he was Larry. But I learned I could ask for what I needed and speak up when I felt like I was being run over.

Larry and I were very different from each other. I'm not an introvert, but I'm closer to the middle of the continuum - a hybrid, I like to call myself. Larry was a textbook extrovert, a party just waiting to happen. I liked Larry, I really did. Just in small doses!

He couldn't be expected to read my mind and know that he was making my head spin. And I learned to cut him some slack, too. He wasn't intentionally being "too much" just to drive me crazy. He was simply energized by having an audience and genuinely liked human interaction.

I try to gear myself up for intense people and remember that the way they are is normal for them, so they don't realize it might be a bit much for others. With that in mind, I can reclaim my personal space if I need to without worrying about hurting their feelings. And I can politely leave when I've had enough.

Knowing I wasn't going to change the "Larrys" in my life helped me accept and deal with them - and it gave me a fighting chance at maintaining harmony.

Are You At Least Willing to Consider this Possibility?

I had a partner in the FBI who was a brilliant agent. Jack [not his real name] had the ability to survey a complex set of facts and glean exactly what was necessary to make a prosecutable case. He could focus on what mattered and not get distracted by all the rest.

That alone would have been enough to win the admiration of his peers. But the other thing was, Jack was unfailingly respectful to everyone, even those suspected of egregious crimes.

One day we showed up unannounced (not uncommon for the FBI) to talk to a guy who really did not want to answer our questions (also not uncommon for the FBI). The man we were interviewing resorted to insulting us to try and make us angry so we would leave. He called us every vulgar name in the book and cast aspersions on the moral character of every one of our ancestors. (That's putting it nicely.)

Jack, in his inimitable style, looked him in the eye and with a smile said, "All that may be true, sir, but at least we're not rude." I'm not kidding when I tell you, the guy got visibly smaller in that moment.

I see a lot of people powering up like that guy who didn't want to be interviewed. People bully others verbally, on-line, even at holiday gatherings, over the most ridiculous things. If you don't agree with them, they're threatened. They get louder and perhaps more profane; they insult and belittle in an effort to make you "go away". They can only win by making you lose.

When you encounter someone like this, are you tempted to lash out in response (clearly not productive but oh-so-appealing)? Or just write them off forever (always my go-to response, to be honest)? How is that not rude, too?

And how about less direct forms of conflict – the jabs and criticisms people level at each other on the Internet through Facebook rants and blog posts; the anonymous comments and the troll tweets. Isn't that just small?

What about those whose opinions we don't agree with? Pundits on TV, politicians, editorials in the paper, the ultra conservative or ultra liberal neighbor. Do we just click off the channel, turn the page, or go back indoors? Or is there another approach?

Obviously, there's something to be said for not engaging with a bully, if at all possible. It's hard to have a tug-of-war when one person refuses to pick up the rope. Do it and there's a good chance you're both going to get covered in mud (or someone's going to get hurt) before it's all over. Isn't that how all tug-of-wars end? As for trolls, they're just mean. Why bother?

But as to the people we simply don't agree with, the ones who approach life and love differently, who see the world through a different lens, what if you were to ask yourself: *"Is it possible there's any part of their viewpoint that might have value?"* Are you willing to even consider it?

I don't know about you, but I get discouraged at the undercurrent of sheer meanness in society and the contempt that seems to taint so many of our interactions. Some of that is within our control.

It seems to me it would lend civility to a lot of conversations if we embraced a little humility, if we paused before reacting and asked ourselves, *"Could I be the one who's wrong here? Maybe they do have a point?"*

- Could we loosen the death grip on our own opinions (not regarding our deeply held convictions or in matters of personal safety) without fearing we are somehow losing our very selves?
- Could we entertain the notion that someone else, even someone we find offensive, might have something of value to add?

If the answer is no, maybe we can at least smile and be respectful. It almost always worked for Jack.

If Harmony Could Choose Its Own Team

I spent that whole year thinking about the concept of harmony. I focused my attention in a singular direction that I believed would be especially helpful to me personally.

Recently, I came across yet another excellent way to think about harmony.

In his book, Your God is Too Safe, Mark Buchanan relates conductor Leonard Bernstein's answer to the question, "What is the hardest instrument to play?"

Without hesitation, Bernstein famously responded, "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony."

So there it is. Second fiddle. That hit home with me. I think "playing second fiddle" is a form of humility and without humility, we're never going to achieve harmony.

Let's face it, we can't all be the Big Dog all the time, not if we want our families, our relationships, our churches and other organizations, to function in a healthy way. We have to choose humility toward one another and be willing to play second fiddle when it's appropriate. (Even the Big Dog.)

Being humble isn't easy. To some, it feels like weakness or defeat. But we don't have to be "shrinking violets" or "doormats" to be humble. And humility doesn't imply conceding every disagreement to anyone who challenges us.

I believe it can start with something as simple as just being courteous. A kind word, a polite response, a listening ear. It's taking that half beat before you react and asking yourself, "Is the response I'm about to give going to help or hurt this situation?" that invites humility and promotes harmony.

Maybe this is what it could look like:

- Treating your sibling as you would a new acquaintance and being gracious;
- Responding to your spouse as you would a valued coworker whose collaboration you appreciate, even when you disagree;
- Reacting to the challenging person in your small group or on your work team as though they were your best friend's son, daughter, or parent.
- Deciding to be considerate about the issue at hand rather than jumping to defensiveness, or insisting on being right, first, or best.

We are all leading complicated lives, every single one of us. Civility as a first response costs us nothing but could make a world of difference in all our relationships. If we would all mutually default to being courteous toward each other *before* we are tempted

to assume the worst and go to our ego arsenal (or assume a victim posture), imagine the impact!

No doubt there are other important aspects of harmony but I would argue, if harmony could choose its own team, humility and courtesy would certainly be on the first string.

Are You In?

Harmony is hard because humans are involved. And frankly, humans are complex creatures.

Living with a more harmonious soundtrack to our lives will require self-control, discipline, patience, motivation, and - honestly? - love.

We'll have to:

- take a beat and consciously opt for a kinder response,
- recognize other people as fellow sojourners, not competitors,
- embrace relational messiness,
- anticipate challenges,
- allow for the possibility that we could be wrong,
- practice humility and courtesy.

But if we care about the people close to us; if we want to cultivate healthier relationships, striving for harmony makes sense . . . and it honors God. What do you say?



Diane is a native Floridian whose career as an FBI Agent got her transferred to the North. After a pretty good run investigating criminals and crazies, she retired from that gig and has returned to her first love as a writer and communicator. She believes a “workaround” life need not be a cobbled-together, just-make-it-work existence; it can be abundant and fulfilling in Christ. Through her writing, she shares evidence of this in the hope of helping others discover this truth for themselves.

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