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- *Individual and corporate faith*
- *Conflicts over differing beliefs*

God who is the beginning and end of all that is, God who created, God who transforms, God who reconciles, God who is peace, is united with each of your lives, individually and corporately. Human life is both individual and corporate. You have understandings that pertain to you as individuals, and you have understandings of what it means to live among others. Each informs the other. The faith development as individuals impacts the faith development of corporate life, and the faith development of a group impacts the faith development of a single being. Those developments are different, and yet each path requires the presence of the other.

You learn first about faith from others. You then internalize it, you transform it, you create from what you have experienced a belief that is very personal. As your corporate experience evolves, all that you learn from others is changed and impacts your own faith journey in differing ways.

Human beings experience the gift of being loved and they pursue a life that is meant to be loving. Being loved and loving are not the same, but loving is putting into action what has been learned through being loved. The individual applies what is learned, and that learning is frequently brought about because of many others. And yet when you look at a group of people, that group is comprised of the very individuals who learn from the group. You learn, in effect, from others who share the same space as you. The collection learns through the experiences of the individual—individual experiences of the single soul, individual experiences of the private human being, the human being who engages in life from many directions. We talk about the parallel lives of human and spirit, but there is also a parallel life of the individual and the corporate, the single and the collective, the *me* and the *we*. They are two sides of the proverbial “same coin.” It is the development of spirit, and development and enhancement of spiritual growth coming from a single source, coming from a multiple set of sources.

Whenever you are confronting the interface between the individual and the group, there will always be some conflict of approach, conflicts of understanding, conflicts of intention. In any group of like-minded souls there exist as many different contexts as there are souls present. Context is everything for context provides meaning to any experience that could otherwise be considered random. Many of you don't believe in mere coincidence, but rather in an intersection of lives, intersection of energies. There is in human interaction nothing that is random. You may meet someone for the first time and react by saying, “What a coincidence that we met.” The truth is your paths' meeting is a combination of similarly directed travels. They may proceed in seemingly different directions, but they lead to the same spot. Two lines that intersect arrive at the same point but travel in different directions. They are drawn to a common

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goal. That is the nature of human life. You are drawn to goals. It is not just a chance meeting.

Each of you comes to this group from a different direction, but you are all drawn here for some purpose that is appropriate to each of you individually, and yet coming together as a group you are more aware of your common purposes, your similarities of spirit than you would be were you not to assemble. You come away from these gatherings with a different perspective as a result of what has been shared. Some share very profoundly, very personally, sharing real concerns at deep emotional levels. Others share less deeply, but share. The importance of being together is the sharing. It is not a dictating of a particular mode of action for a specific approach. You bring to your gathering what you bring, and for everyone, that gift is different but it contributes to the whole because you are bringing what you as individuals experience.

It is precisely this same mechanism that draws individuals together to form religions, to form sects, to form collectives that seek a common understanding of God, whether formal or informal. You are drawn to this group because the nature of the messages that are shared has meaning to you. Others are drawn to groups because of the nature of some other common exercise, some other common belief, some other common approach. Invariably, these groups interact with one another, and it is from those interactions that conflict can arise. When you do encounter others whose belief systems are different from yours, what do you do? Is your system better than another's? Does your system have more truth than another? Is your system more valid to you than another's system is valid to them? The answer is clearly "no." This conflict between groups historically has often led to violence, violence directed toward other nations and ethnic identities. Where do you step forward and assert what you believe, especially when according to your own understanding the other group's commonly held beliefs seem wrong, seem ungodly by however you define it? What do you do? What does it mean to transform your attitudes into action?

Conflict arises whenever there is a sense of exclusivity. When one group insists, "We know what is best," that very statement negates immediately the understandings of another. It invalidates the belief systems held elsewhere. You cannot confront another's belief system from the perspective that you are correct and another is incorrect. It may be true that either you or the other feel an exclusive understanding of Truth with a capital T. But you cannot allow that sense of rightness to indicate by its very presence the wrongness of an opposing view. You collectively, beyond this group, may feel strongly about a set of beliefs, and that set is part of what unites you, part of what gives you an identity. But this is also true of others. Were they not in agreement with a given perspective, they would identify with something else.

Wars are fought over fear of loss and the need for control. Holy wars are not merely wars of belief in a God being opposed to groups with another belief. Fighting wars on the basis of a faith is a way of strengthening your collective resolve that your

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set of beliefs has more validity, is more right than another, and being the owners of that valid belief system, you are then entitled to dominate, to control, to occupy, to press your beliefs on others. In so doing, you have less reason to fear you may be wrong. It is a vicious system that leads to wars of faith.

The truth is there is no single way to describe God, but where do you take a stand? How far can other's belief system travel before you say, "Stop, you cannot continue?" We urge you always to live your faith, to live according to what you know, to be what you believe. But how is this played out? It is not played out by fighting back, and in a sense saying, "No, you're wrong, we're right." That solves nothing in a conflict, for no belief system can tolerate being identified as wrong.

You transform, you change the shape of life first of all by understanding. If you are confronted by groups, nations, religions that cause in you great concern, transformation is achieved by learning. Learning is achieved by listening, by being a part of what it is you fear, for in the process of learning more of what you fear to be wrong, you may find your own beliefs transformed and your sense of what is godly will be a new combination of part of what it was you feared and part of what it was that gave you strength. It is the transformation that is most critical. You don't overthrow. You don't overcome. You don't annihilate. You seek transformation, but that transformation is not a transformation of others. You seek your own transformation in the process.

Your lives of transformation can be strong evidence that encourages trust in the process which in turn allows for the transformation of others. It serves little purpose to draw a line in the sand and say to another, "Go no further." You will achieve the objectives of peace that you seek when you understand more what another feels, for there is some truth, *some* truth in the beliefs held by everyone. There is no human being who is not illuminated in some corner of his or her life by a vision of part of what truth is. That is part of the divine spark that all share. That is why you cannot condemn another individual, why you cannot condemn a group of individuals, why you cannot condemn a religion, why you cannot condemn a nation, for there is a spark of truth that is perceived by all, and as you learn the beliefs of others, you will recognize truth. Others will recognize truth through their interaction with you. They may not agree one hundred percent with your perspective. They may not agree with your perceptions, but they will see something that they can take away, and in that process, both are transformed. They are moved infinitesimally closer to one another, and as this process continues, they draw even closer. Eventually the conflict has no meaning. It does not mean that all is in full harmony, but rather that the grounds which form the basis for the intense conflict have been resolved. The individual versus the group. One individual versus another. One group versus another. One religion versus another. One nation versus another. All can be resolved through this process.

Human beings see life through time. If you eliminate time, then you can concentrate on life as a transformative experience that continues. Why is it so essential

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that full transformation be achieved in your own lifetime? Why can't human beings be fulfilled through the process of belonging to the transformation as a continuous event rather than a specific goal which must be achieved at a given time?

Eliminate the sense of time. Dedicate yourselves to the transformations that give your lives meaning, and rejoice in the process with a faith that all that you do contributes to the transformation for which you pray. Removing yourself from the process does not move the process forward. Keep your engagement. Keep your faith in the value of what it is you believe. Keep your faith in the value of God's presence in the journey that *all* undertake. Seek that Presence in your own lives. Seek that Presence in those areas that bring conflict to your lives, and that conflict will continue to be transformed. *You* will be transformed, and the will, the wish, the reality of God's peace will prevail.

Amen.