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## Dealing with Differences

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## Dealing with Differences

We are in an age of increased toleration of different religions, beliefs, and life-styles as well as increased tensions linked with these same differences. In relating with others about matters that are important to us – our religion, beliefs, and values – we can learn much from those who are different from us only to the extent that we honor and respect our own experience. If we attend to what is most deeply our own, we can carefully and consciously relate what we hold most dear with insights and challenging considerations that others present, and so deepen and broaden our personal commitments.

People who are unsure of their values and beliefs will probably not strengthen them through dialogue with persons who hold diverse values and beliefs. Someone who has a beginning interest in basketball will learn very little that is relevant by relating exclusively with those who play softball and golf, whereas a committed basketball player, who has a love of the game and much experience, can converse meaningfully with those who thoroughly enjoy playing softball or golf. Those whose beliefs and practices are grounded in experience can grow and mature through exchanges of thoughts and ideas with others, even when some of what they hear and observe is quite unfamiliar.

Most of us have experiences of contact with God, which are primarily of trust and love and only secondarily comprised of thoughts and ideas. So, if we talk with others about experiences of God more than concepts about God, we will usually find that we have some positive connections with one another, though we might not be able to explain what exactly those connections might be. And if we try to describe in words the values that we hold most strongly, we might struggle, but if we reflect on our behavior, we will more readily identify the sources of our actions and be able to talk about them with others.

Accepting differences among us is not the same as saying that “nothing matters” or that “everything is relative.” Rather, we acknowledge that we do not all have to live in similar life patterns, but that we do have much in common as humans. If two families of friends in the same neighborhood celebrate the same holiday and accept each other’s different ways of celebrating that holiday, we can at least imagine the possibility of finding an underlying unity with those whose culture, religion, and manner of living is quite different from our own. We can become more aware of our underlying unity with others if we reflect on our own beliefs. From our experience of relating with God

and living out of our values, we will recognize some similarities with what others say about their experiences of receiving a “calling,” of being given some guidance or inspiration, or about gaining clarity as to the meaning and purpose of their lives.

Problems arise when we talk too much about practices, rituals, and rules. Overmuch attention to details that differ among us can be divisive, while relating from the experiences that underlie our practices can be both satisfying and unifying. Because we live primarily from our values and not by theories or rules, we will profit most by learning from one another about the experiences that make us who we are and that most influence our important decisions. Practice flows from inside, where beliefs provide impetus for our actions.

Successfully dealing with differences among us is a work of the Spirit, and not ultimately of our doing. In the sacred enclosure of our hearts we each commune with God in our own way, personally and individually. God relates with each of us according to our individual qualities, including our openness to experience, and our honesty in reflecting upon it. We do not have to understand everything about our differences to accept one another. Rather, we will discover what we have in common when we attend to the thoughts and feelings that are of the Spirit, and those that are not. We cannot decide whether someone else’s beliefs are true or false, but we can judge for ourselves whether or not what we hear and observe resonates with our spirit and opens us to God, or not.

Dealing with differences leads us, perhaps surprisingly, to God, who loves and cherishes us each and all.