

The Agony of Trust

A friend was relating an upsetting incident to me the other day, and I want to share it with you. Martha told me of a conflict she was having with her friend named Sue. She told me that Sue and she are on a Board of Directors for a service agency in the community and that Sue had just forced her off the board. I shared with her that the circumstances certainly seemed upsetting. She told me that she was dumbfounded by Sue's behavior.

As bad as it sounds, yet because I have been encouraged to look for the positive in any situation, I suggested that there might be something good. When she heard this she nodded like she supposed that was possible. I then suggested that one good thing was that not being on the board gave her some extra free time. She wasn't overly impressed with this suggestion. I then suggested that there might be something in the situation that was a woman's thing. She looked at me quizzically. We had been discussing the concept that because people were naturally hesitant about being vulnerable that they unconsciously built into their relationships an escape route should their vulnerability be taken advantage of. Certainly, when Martha's friend "turned" against her, the vulnerability for Martha was transgressed. One way of escaping from the situation was to feel taken advantage of, as an innocent victim of the other person's unusual behavior. This feeling would give Martha the right to distance herself from the relationship.

Sometimes when someone transgresses and hurts the other person, they will not be able to stand the other person's presence because the very presence of the other person symbolizes their failure. It also happens in the same way for the person hurt. The transgressor comes to represent an unacceptable degree of betrayal and they must distance from the relationship. Both people act in concert to distance from the relationship, each with their own rationalization that justifies the decision.

Well, at this point Martha felt a bit befuddled, and just a bit embarrassed. She began to relate about the history of the incident. It seems that Martha, who is in business, was part of a group who were investing in a new project. Sue's husband was part of this partnership and they had signed a confidentiality agreement that forbade them to share with anyone outside the group the details of the partnership and the names of the partners. This was at a time that Martha's friend and her husband socialized frequently with Martha and her husband, so their partnership was a secret that Martha and Sue's husband kept from their spouses. Sometime later Sue divorced her husband, still unaware of the business relationship that Martha was in with her ex-husband. Martha wanted to tell Sue about the business relationship with the ex-husband, but could not due to the confidentiality agreement. At some time, Martha found out that someone was about to disclose the business relationship with Sue, and Martha was afraid that Sue would feel that their friendship was betrayed because Martha was doing business with her enemy, the ex-husband. Martha was in an ethical dilemma. Should she maintain the confidentiality, or should she rush to tell Sue the truth before the relationship was revealed by this third party? Martha anticipated that Sue would feel betrayed by Martha's lack of disclosure as to the business relationship and so she decided to call Sue and confess all before the third party revealed the secret. When Martha called Sue, Sue was incensed, and abruptly hung up. Martha subsequently attempted to mend the break, but Sue was unmovable. Martha felt Sue betrayed her by cutting off the relationship, and Sue felt that Martha betrayed her by not having her priorities straight as proved by Sue waiting so long to tell her of the business relationship with her ex-husband. In fact, she felt that Martha should have withdrawn from the partnership as soon as she found out

about the impending divorce. After all, how could she do business with such a horrible man? Not able to resolve her feelings she used her influence by forcing Martha off the Board of Directors and thereby eliminating the association with Martha that would have occurred at the meetings.

This situation had one more twist. Martha's dilemma was an ethical one that had to do with knowing one's self. She had contacted Sue only because of the impending third party contacting Sue. To Martha point of view, she was attempting to maintain the relationship. However from another perspective, Martha had doubted Sue's character by assuming that the revelation from a third party would end or severely threaten the viability of the relationship. When she confessed to Sue, instead of commencing the conversation with an explanation of her ethical dilemma, she had started the conversation only with the information about the partnership. Sue, taken by surprise reacted by cutting off the conversation at that point. This meant that Martha didn't have the opportunity to explain her ethical dilemma. To Sue, the abruptness of the confession actually demonstrated Martha's lack of trust in the relationship, forcing the friend into a crisis that was overwhelming. The overwhelming circumstances of not being trusted needed an emotional release, which was achieved by Sue distancing herself from Martha. Martha insulted Sue unwittingly by not trusting her and in the way she shared her situation prevented Sue from empathizing with her ethical dilemma. Martha took that possibility away from Sue. She did not give Sue the trust that would have allowed Sue to have the time to internally process the shock, and come to a position of unconditional acceptance of Martha, with the consequent acceptance of Martha's pain in being caught in such an intense and threatening dilemma. Martha did not provide the friend with the opportunity to maintain the relationship. This all operated at a subconscious level, with no operative awareness, so the consequences was not a betrayal of the first order where Martha was in a secret business relationship with the husband, nor was it of a second order, where the threat of intimacy was overwhelming thus forcing distance in the relationship, but it was rather of the third magnitude, where Martha lost her perspective and failed to trust Sue to come to a good place with the crisis.

Exploring these insights together was helpful to both Martha and me for without this discussion neither of us would likely have by ourselves come to understand these subtle dynamics of relationships. I wonder whether Martha will one day have the opportunity to share some of this with Sue.