NO RESOLUTION - NO PEACE

By Lennox W. Abrigo

*"And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread,
and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on
her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away." Genesis 21:14.*

It would appear that the conclusion, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), stands for the proposition that since, through Adam, "… sin entered into the world, and death by sin…" (Romans 5:12), therefore, every human being is mortal and morally[1] imperfect, i.e., ungodly or sinful. This natural state of immorality predisposes us to instinctively act in an unfair or unjust manner. Sadly, such accurate biblical descriptions of human nature and its potential destructive effects on society have been rejected by the world view dominating popular culture. So, more and more, actions tied to man's physical and moral defects are being endorsed in the public market place of ideas as replacement for moral values and statutes - divine principles that were introduced from creation to establish and maintain order[2] in society. Is this repudiation of moral authority, therefore, partly responsible for modern civilization's lamentable descent into decadence, disorder and eventually chaos?

Anthropologists[3] and historians have long observed that the ascendency of immorality, specifically relational violence such as inequity and injustice, has in every civilization across time, eroded its foundation. This is probably so because, as you may suspect, the cornerstone of orderly society is healthy *personal relationships*,[4] for well grounded marriages tend to expand into nurturing families, which feed non-toxic schools and churches that merge to become stable, balanced communities. Interpersonal relationships, however, are being continuously undermined by one human imperfection or the other, inherent or acquired. For instance *fear,*[5] which I believe

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[1] Academic discussions regarding the notion of morality usually belong to the disciplines of Philosophy and Theology. Philosophy, because there is no material equivalent for the idea of morality (an abstract noun), as there is for hand, car or book, thus its descriptions cannot be categorized as scientific knowledge (cannot be observed or tested), for it pertains to intangibles like fair play, equity and justice. And Theology, because the Bible records the beginnings of human civilization and the fact that God codified moral practices and introduced them into human society.

[2] Society is orderly when it's clean, arranged in a universally acceptable pattern, regulated by strict adherence to the rule of law, committed to guarantee justice and equity for each resident, peaceful and safe.

[3] Marimba Ani, offers a seminal analysis of the psyche and moral preferences underlying Western Civilization in her landmark work, *Yurugu: an African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*, African World Press: New Jersey, 1994.

[4] There is a distinction between general social interaction and personal relationships. General contact occurs whenever individuals enter each other's physical private space (within an arm's length), exchange formal neighborly greetings or communicate or socialize in any way without deeper connections. Relationships, on the other hand, require uniting around a common purpose or intimacy.

[5] The term fear, in this context, refers to the *mental process* associated with specific triggers and reactions (e.g. claustrophobia, hydrophobia). This process is initiated when neuro pathways are created by painful or unpleasant experiences that traumatize us. As it relates to human development, experts say our brains are being "hard wired" when those and all other neuro pathways are being constructed. Also, once the brain's electro-chemical mechanism records a particular trauma, anything (e.g. people, smells, places and colors) associated with the original emotional pain can trigger involuntary psychological and physiological responses (e.g. speaking loudly, temporary immobility,

is the least recognized enemy of social interaction and partnerships, is usually the emotional root of conflicts, while at the same time, derails strategies that resolve those contentions.

We know this because fear or the *mental process* linked to neuro pathways made by emotional trauma, behavioral scientists indicate,[6] produces compulsive urges to self-prioritize (exhibit selfishness). In so doing, human beings are driven to ignore and devalue others, marginalize the preferences and goals of their associates; even exterminate neighbors when necessary. Those powerful impulses are also linked to innocuous incidents, such as commuters jostling their way in front of other passenger when entering crowded public transportation during rush hour periods. But is behavior that is unsuspectingly motivated by irresistible desires for self-promotion limited to interactions with strangers? Of course not, since obsessive competition also invades intimate relationships, particularly when perceived threats to either party's preferences, status or comforts surface. And because evidence of rivalries is known to all, the belief that the disease of selfishness has indeed infected everyone multiplies. This undeniable global condition constrains me to agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) view of modern civilization that, "It is said to be the age of the first person singular."[7]

Further proof of this pandemic is also well reported in media that provide news from around the world. Extreme examples of such reports are accounts of genocide that have become public knowledge over the last half century. They expose shocking details of atrocities committed in Cambodia, Kosovo, Serbia, Northern Ireland, Rohwanda, Darfur and most recently, Kenya. Given that selfishness is a universal human imperfection, therefore, it should not be difficult to accept that social contact of itself is the birth place of *conflicts*.[8] For, if when individuals interact, each person's brain compulsively pushes him to pursue his own interests, to the neglect of the preferences of others, then automatic resistance, one against the other, is the inevitable outcome. This is acutely so in circumstances which only allow for one person's pursuit or need to be satisfied (e.g. being the mayor, pastor or president; purchasing a personal item for a spouse or child with the allocation from the family budget). These events naturally create a win/loose situation, which experience has shown, pushes losers to resent and feel anger toward winners.

Conflicts, however, are antithetical to the *peace*[9] God intended to characterize social interaction. For conflicts antagonize and divide people, leading to pain and destruction; while peace, which is facilitated by commitments to be selfless and to compromise, produces a harvest of growth, happiness and well being. This indicates that, like all of God's gifts to mankind, peace should not only be seen as a spiritual blessing because of *its functional value to the creation of order in society*. Would such order exist if strife dominated all human contact? This question is probably best answered by looking at the chaos prevailing in war torn communities in the Middle East and across the continent of Africa. In reviewing Plato, Will Durant admits that, "Life in

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sweating and increased heart rate). These symptoms of fear function as *flight-or-fight* preparation signals; designed to separate us from whatever causes us to feel hurt.

[6] See J. L. Bradshaw and J. B. Mattingley, *Clinical Neuropsychology: Behavioral and Brain Science*, Prentice Hall, 2007.

[7] "Peculiarities of the Present Age," #2, journal, January-February 1827.

[8] Conflicts, as a relational matter, are fear based (motivated by a need for protection) contentions or battles between opponents, in which attempts to impose views, authority or practices, for example, are pushing in one direction, while *resistance* to such *impositions* is pushing in the opposite direction.

[9] Some behavioral experts see peace as a condition of relationships that results directly from harmony and agreement between parties, because everyone involved is committed to making compromises and being selfless.

society requires the concession of some part of the individual's sovereignty to the common order; and ultimately the norm of conduct becomes the welfare of the group."[10]

The creation story (Genesis 1 and 2) seems to suggest that God introduced *the natural principle of family* as a way of establishing order within the animal kingdom. This universal law was also designed, I believe, to model and advertize the reality of humans coexisting harmoniously in a peaceful environment that promotes emotional health, safety and perpetual growth. But despite their unavoidable dependence on each other and long standing intimacy, we know that even among family members, conflicts arise. Similarly, the stability of other types of relationships is also frequently jeopardized when those involved refuse to selflessly compromise to maintain harmony. The same result obtains if one party does not sufficiently value the other by promoting his interests and success.

Relationships and general social interaction of this kind eventually become overcast with feelings of discontent, anger, insecurity and resentment, which separate the parties emotionally, long before they act out negatively in ways that cause them to resist each other's ideas, desires and contributions to the team. But, thankfully, all is not lost in such unpleasant situations. Because whenever this happens, I theorize, the conflict is best remedied through the process of *resolution*.[11] Reconciliation is never instantaneous, for combatants arrive there from estrangement only by way of arduous efforts. President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) was contemplating that journey when he asserted: "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures."[12] Thus my purpose here is twofold; first, to highlight a skill set (resolution) that will produce peace in relationships, and second, to briefly call attention to the emotional bedrock (fear) of conflicts. As such, this discussion reaches beyond the objective commonly referred to as Conflict Resolution, which many see as placing to strong an emphasis on ethical and public-image reforms, while diminishing the true weight of the central causes of disharmony.

Interestingly, the passage of Scripture we will consider (Genesis 21:9-14), details an occasion when Abraham and Sarah successfully resolved a situation in which she resisted his selfish insensitivity to her fear of being abandoned in old age, which, by the definitions offered in this essay, qualifies as a conflict. What's also noteworthy about this biblical saga is it provides a *theological precedent* for returning peace to this type of conflict, because God in mercy intervened directly and the patriarch faithfully followed His counsel. By so doing, I would argue, Abraham's selfless compromise, which was a necessary step in the journey of resolution, became the only path to peace regarding this specific contention. In addition, is it significant to you that God did not instruct this husband to perform a religious ritual, i.e., prayer or fasting, as a specific solution to the problem, but upheld instead a practical, relevant, concrete, measurable course of action?

On that occasion, the narrative reveals, Sarah's attempt to soften the dehumanizing effects of being stigmatized or rejected by her community for her inability to bear her husband children, ignited a family crisis that was fueled by several ill conceived plans. To begin with, as a result of

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[10] W. Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, Simon & Schuster: New York, 1961, p 34.

[11] Disputes are not entirely resolved until the relevant parties are verifiably comfortable (beyond the period of *post decisional dissonance*) with the compromises everyone made to achieve harmony between them. Therefore, resolution, which is the process or journey to peace, is the result of the principals performing three critical duties: *acknowledging* the symptoms or real causes of their conflict, *valuing* each other unconditionally and upholding the other person's human rights and *performing* repentive actions that are opposite to the unacceptable behavior that ignited the conflict.

[12] United Nations address, Ney York City, 20 September 1963.

being overwhelmed by the humiliation that accompanied barrenness in their Near Eastern culture, and since it was sanctioned by the civil laws of their time and region,[13] Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, was ordered by her mistress to share conjugal privileges with Abraham, which resulted in the birth of his first child, Ishmael.

Bad decisions, nonetheless a staple of the human experience, often yield surprising and unbearable consequences. For though not given sufficient importance at the time that compulsive decision was made, the presence of the concubine and her son in Sarah's home must have been a constant painful reminder of being rejected by her peers for possessing an inadequacy she did not choose. Furthermore, guilt induced by her involvement in Ishmael's birth, most likely caused her to secretly blame Abraham for this new painful situation she was forced to endure. To make matters worse, as time passed, Sarah probably hated her handmaid, who became dispensable, because, by this time, God had fulfilled His promise to Abraham, not long after his one hundredth birthday, that he would have a son by Sarah, his wife (Genesis 21:1-5). Thus her tolerance of the self-inflicted intrusion understandably evaporated when she confronted the possibility that her son, Isaac, could be denied or required to share the family birthright, which she feared could potentially leave her destitute[14] (the root of the conflict), since, as the first born son, Ishmael was legitimately entitled to inherit Abraham's estate (v. 9).

So, as is the case with all human beings, critical relational intangibles (fear of abandonment; feelings of rejection, guilt, anger or insecurity) significantly handicapped Mrs. Abraham's decision to follow the divine blueprint for such circumstances - selfless compromise. Instead, they caused her to act out her *conflict behavior* by compulsively lashing out in very negative ways; desiring to prioritize her interests regarding the family inheritance in such a manner as to obliterate Hagar's and Ishmael's. Toward that end, she compelled her husband to banish them forever ("Cast out this bondwoman and her son") from his tribal lands (v. 10). And while her sentence may seem unjust to some, from a strictly clinical perspective, once verbalized, that demand for her partner's *repentive action* became a necessary component of resolution within that situation, which, if carried out in conjunction with *acknowledging* and *valuing*, increases the probability of achieving peace. As I see it, resolution for any relational conflict is a three-dimensional process, so that resolution is the journey and peace is the destination. But, as a general matter, you may be wondering, even if that result materialized between Abraham and Sarah, can we be reasonably certain that this method of resolution is effective, universally?

Based on the fact that Scriptural advice is inherently sound, and that human beings are fundamentally alike, as well as for formal reasons, all of which stand by force of resistless logic, I believe it is. As a logical matter, for example, since *harmony* or the absence of conflicts between people *creates peace*, and *resolution* of those conflicts *creates harmony*, therefore, such *resolution* must necessarily *create peace*. Which demonstrates, at least according to, "…the

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[13] There is sufficient archeological evidence from the time and territory occupied by Semitic peoples which indicates that wives obligated themselves contractually to give their husbands children, even if it required the use of their handmaids to accomplish that goal. Some of the evidence recovered includes marriage contracts that belonged to couples of that period. This practice, the Bible confirms, was also known to Abraham's younger grandson, Jacob, during his sojourn in Laban's house, since both of his wives gave him children by their handmaids (Genesis 30:7, 10).

[14] Most women who lived at this time could not be parties to business contracts or conduct official financial transactions in courts or the public square. Neither could they hold public office or legally own property, which eliminated them from opportunities to be heirs of anyone's estate. So in Sarah's case, her future financial stability, if she became a widow, was entirely dependent on her son's wealth. Regrettably, injustice against Jewish women, with regard to their legal status in society, extended to the time of Christ and beyond.

theory of the syllogism – Aristotle's account of correct and incorrect reasoning,"[15] that the proposition that resolution leads to peace is formally true. It's also true for practical reasons, since the elements and trilateral nature of this method enables it to reliably neutralize the basic causal factors of relational conflicts. I discovered this through serious, painstaking consideration of the essential preconditions of conflicts, including psychological characteristics, which, if ignored, can forestall or undermine resolution. As such, it should be central to our thinking about this matter that fear is a significant emotional contributor to conflicts, which informs my definition of the term (See Footnote 5).

What is also fundamentally true about this formula for resolution is it's simply another application of the arithmetic principles of addition and subtraction. For if the nature of conflict is opposite to that of peace, and the preconditions of conflict are fear, selfishness, triggering behavior, anger and conflict behavior, then resolution, which creates peace, must necessarily account for, reverse or subtract those factors from relationships. Resolution, therefore, requires the commitment of the relevant parties to effect this subtraction, pursuant to harmony regarding the point of contention.

Having said that, let's return briefly to our story in an effort to discover other truths that may be beneficial to the conduct of relationships. From my point of view, which was framed by several sharp disagreements in my childhood home, as well as by similar situations that required my intervention as a Christian Counselor, this family feud raises current issues and offers three insights I find instructive.

First, *all conflicts have an emotional root*. Psychologists, Anita Gurian and Robin F. Goodman are reasonably certain that childhood emotional trauma and pain construct the mental source of fears that remain throughout our lives.[16] A young girl, for instance, who felt abandoned, *viz a viz,* alone, unprotected or unsure about her future, is likely to be apprehensive about *intimacy* with or *trusting* others, as she grows older. This is so because we now know that both of those phobias are formidable inhibitors to healthy relationships, since they weaken our ability to *bond* [17] with spouses and children; even with church members or those in other social groups. A woman's *childhood fear of abandonment* (the major cause of insecurity and lack of self esteem) can also manifest as sternness or combativeness or being reserved or aggressive in adulthood, which are compulsive defense/protection mechanisms that push people away in order to avoid the pain of loosing attachment to them, if a relationship developed.

Thus it's highly likely that Sarah's general *insecurity,* which was exacerbated by her immediate fear of being dispossessed, could have been the emotional root of her plan to destroy her rivals. My rationale for this suspicion is careful examination of the early experiences of girls and boys who later act out obsessively or compulsively, usually reveals that those conditions are tied to underlying fears caused by emotional scars made from being repeatedly betrayed or disappointed during childhood by individuals they trusted to be their emotional safe place and guarantee their physical well being. As a result, they become adults who possess a psychological

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[15] Adler, Mortimer J. *Aristotle For Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy.* Simon & Schuster: New York, 1978, p 139.

[16] Some of the best work in this field is being done by Dr. Gurian and her colleagues at the New York University Child Study Center (CSC), which was founded in 1997 at Bellevue Hospital Center, with Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D., as Director. The CSC is built around a group of research Institutes with associated clinical arms.

[17] In, *Changes That Heal*, psychologist, Dr. Henry Cloud, states: "*Bonding* is the ability to establish an emotional attachment to another person. It's the ability to relate to another on the deepest level. When two people have a bond with each other, they share their deepest thoughts, dreams, and feelings with each other with no fear that they will be rejected by the other person."

predisposition to mistrust others, which can cause another person's innocent actions to trigger their fears and sets the stage for conflict. This hypothesis represents my understanding of the psychological progression from fears to conflicts. The steps are: 1) childhood traumas that create fears; 2) experiences that awaken those fears; 3) awakened fears that create dissatisfaction with behavior, and 4) negative, compulsive responses prompted by such dissatisfactions.

Second, *experiences or observation can trigger our fears*. Sarah reacted with finality when sibling rivalry alerted her to the possibly that Isaac's inheritance could be in jeopardy. She took an impulsive step the moment she "saw" Ishmael "mocking" Isaac (v. 9). That incident, according to my hypothesis, resurrected her fear of suffering the very fate she imposed on Hagar, should Abraham's demise precede hers. "You can discover what your enemy fears most," argues Eric Hoffer (1902-1983), "by observing the means he uses to frighten you."[18] This clearly illustrates how observation, which is actually using any one of the five senses, can be a means by which our secret fears are revived or awakened. Sarah *saw* one child lording over the other ("mocking") and became aggressively protective, out of fear of the possibility of being disinherited (v. 10); Elijah *heard* Jezebel's threat and ran for his life to the wilderness of Beer-sheba, out of fear that evil would triumph over good (1 Kings 19:3-4); Shortly after their deliverance from Egypt, Israel *tasted* the bitter waters of Marah and chose to doubt God, out of fear of journeying into the unknown (Exodus 15:23-24).

Third, *incidents associated with conflicts are usually symptoms or characteristics of the underlying problems; not the problems themselves or their causes*. Fights, separations or divorces, firings, ending contact, disruptions in classes, angry words and rash decisions are most often visible *post evento* (after the fact) signs or symptoms of underlying personal problems affecting people in relationships. For while they can be, seldom are they ever direct reactions to the situation at hand. And ever so often, those who intervene to resolve conflicts fail to offer effective solutions simply because they lack the skills that would enable them to distinguish between root problems, their symptoms and their causes. In Sarah's case, for instance, Ishmael's "mocking" (v. 9) was only a symptom of or incident related to the conflict; the fundamental problem was Ishmael's threatening presence in the home, for which Abraham was equally complicit. That this was the underlying cause of the conflict is implied in Sarah's command to, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son," and in her reason for requiring that remedy: "for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son" (v. 10).

To medical observers, however, Sarah's drastic actions will be viewed from a slightly different perspective. They would be seen as indicators of a depressive disorder. Dr. Colbert believes, "Depression is not just one condition, but comes in a wide variety of types and degrees of severity," and that "it's a toxic emotional and psychological state." This condition is often referred to as "the common cold of mental illness," he says, probably because it affects an alarming nineteen million adults, here in the US, as well as more than two out of every hundred children.[19] It may be helpful to know that, "Depression comes in three basic varieties: major depressive disorder," which is associated with multiple symptoms, "dysthymic disorder, and bipolar disorder."[20] And while the biblical account does not provide sufficient data regarding

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[18] The Passionate State of Mind: And Other Aphorisms, 222, 1954.

[19] W. E. Narrow, "One-Year Prevalence of Depressive Disorders Among Adults Eighteen and Older in the U.S.," *HIMH ECA Prospective Data*. Population estimates based on U.S. Census estimated residential population age eighteen and over on July 1, 1998. Unpublished.

[20] D. Colbert, *Deadly Emotions*, Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2003, p 67.

Sarah's symptoms, I would venture to speculate from what is given that she was suffering from dysthymia, which is a less severe form of the disorder.

Fortunately, this episode in the sacred biography of the father of the faithful brings to the surface what I believe are three critical steps to resolving relational conflicts. As mentioned earlier, they are *acknowledging, valuing* and *performing* (See Footnote 10). In taking the first step, Abraham *acknowledged his wife's dissatisfaction*, which gave rise to the conflict, by *connecting* with her concern in a way that caused him to respond appropriately. He also accepted God's assessment of his true feelings regarding evicting Hagar and Ishmael (vv. 11-12a). Let me mention, in passing, that another effective way to acknowledge relational problems is to verbalize or "confess" them (James 5:16). But as important and necessary as acknowledging problems is, I would caution that resolution is seldom achieved without strenuous efforts to progress to the two other steps. Certainly, resolution cannot be attained through acknowledgement alone.

Notice, therefore, that Abraham, a paragon of faith, proceeded to the second step – *valuing his partner enough to selflessly grant her request*. In doing this, a significant objective is to accept responsibility for ones own actions, and leave others to account for their behavior. Thus the father of all Israel submitted to God's directive: "… in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice…" (12b). I suspect that in Abraham's ancient and rigidly patriarchal society, it must have required childlike faith in God and genuine piety to surrender his convictions and accept the judgment of a woman; in other words, to bow to his wife's leadership on that issue. Insofar as it accomplishes resolution, however, such selflessness is a critical component of the search for the kind of peace between individuals I'm advocating in this discussion. And such obedience will be rewarded by Jesus who promised, Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9).

Finally, Abram accomplished the third step – *performing repentive actions* – which in most cases are the opposite of those that hurt the offended party. So, early one morning, in compliance with his wife's directive and God's concurrence with it, he expelled Hagar and her son from his estate (v 14). Abraham was directly responsible for the conception of this son and for adding him to the family, thus his *repentive actions* necessitated initiating the boy's death to the household through expulsion. And because God was directly involved in these circumstances, there were no losers. Hagar and Ishmael were victorious in that they were both adopted and cared for by our heavenly Father; Sarah's victory was having her specific wishes met, with God's approval; Abraham gained a personal victory by honoring his wife, restoring peace between them and submitting to his Lord in selfless obedience. Ralph Waldo Emerson was again right when he said: "The god of Victory is said to be one-handed, but Peace gives victory to both sides."[21]

Therefore, for those who may need to reestablish peace between you and someone else, my advice is to take the safest route to harmony which is through the three-step process of resolution delineated above. Fortunately, there is a biblical model available, from which I extrapolated those critical steps. But as you well know, the fact that the method is biblical provides no guarantee that the prescribed steps are easy to perform; certainly not in ones own strength. With God's enabling power accessible to you, however, every action He desires you to perform can be accomplished (See Philippians 4:13). This truth was also emphasized by the heavenly messenger whose tidings prompted the Magnificat. The angel's assurance to Mary was: "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Let's, therefore, commit to pursue this peace, which is indispensible to social order in every community, using the method recommended.

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[21] Journal, September 1867.