

Call a Truce: In worrisome times, it's essential to keep the peace among family and friends

by Jordan Lite - March 9, 2003

You've just sat down to the dinner party you've been planning for weeks when one of the guests begins talking about a possible U.S.-led war against Iraq.

Forks are lowered, voices rise and the discussion escalates into an argument. The fish is getting cold, and you wonder if everyone will still be speaking by night's end. Is it possible to debate such a loaded topic without hurt feelings, tears or broken dishes?

It's hardly an exaggeration to say that disagreements over Iraq, the war on terrorism and 9/11 have altered, and in some cases ended, relationships. Many people are anxious about terror alerts and government recommendations about how to protect oneself and one's family against an attack. Others are angry about new restrictions on civil liberties that were implemented after 9/11. These feelings can influence conversations about possible military action against Iraq, a topic that brings together all of these concerns, making an opposing viewpoint feel like a personal attack.

"People never speak to each other after that," says Doe Lang, a psychotherapist and communications specialist in Manhattan. "This is a very, very difficult time, so it's natural that there's a level of very strong feeling."

But strong feelings needn't get in the way of effective and respectful communication, say Lang and others who work in the field of conflict resolution. Conversations about touchy subjects, rather than proving destructive, can actually preserve or strengthen relationships with family, friends, colleagues — even the taxi driver who was, until 10 minutes ago, a stranger. "You have an opportunity to make good humor out of things you can do nothing about," Lang says.

The direction that a discussion will take over Iraq, or any other contentious issue, depends a great deal on the dynamics of the relationship between the people doing the talking. Understanding those dynamics can show why communication breaks down — and it can improve the tone of a tense debate.

How people behave in a discussion about a crisis, says Lang, "is characteristic of how they act in other crises. [In new relationships,] it could make a difference between yes and no, because it gives you a lot of insight into people's mental habits and the level of prejudice and enlightenment they bring to public affairs. Individuals' history comes into play when there is a public issue they don't agree about."

Much of that history stems from the values and structure of the family a person grew up in, says Bonnie Jacobson, director of the New York Institute for Psychological Change and author of the book "If Only You Would Listen."

Emotions take over

In families in which power is distributed in a hierarchical way and disagreements manifest themselves as fights, anger and upset are more likely, Jacobson says. But in families with a more egalitarian style, "where there aren't winners and losers, it may be easier to tolerate differing opinions in the family," she says.

"If there's a family in which one person is legalistic, they fight each other for whose argument is going to be more logical. The top dog wins," Jacobson says. "It feels personal if in your mind there can only be one answer and if the other person's prevails, you lose."

Then there are factors that can make the personal political. Reminders of interactions with a bully or someone who was emotionally overpowering can stir aggressive, antagonistic or defensive behavior. What's more, if a person identifies strongly with some of the players who would be more directly affected by a war between the United States and Iraq — American soldiers, for example, or Iraqi civilians — the debate may become emotional.

"If you notice that you're really out of control, assume it's not about the content. It's not," Jacobson says. "The intensity has to be about something in your own life."

But other communication specialists say it's impossible to separate one's emotions from their belief system.

"My beliefs are determined by my emotions, which determine what I see and how I perceive things," says Gerald Goodman, a professor emeritus of psychology at UCLA who is studying how humans accept and reject one another in conversation. "People act religiously about politics. They 'know,' they have leaps of faith," he says. "The mental gymnastics required to suspend your own disbelief and ideology takes something like love to overcome — or an abundance of mental health."

Yet recognizing the role emotions play in one's position on Iraq promotes respect and a sense that those conversing are exchanging viewpoints rather than bickering. When a person is talking with anger about Iraq, Lang says, he will not respond to a statement about the content of that conversation until he feels calm. In that case, a reply such as "I see you feel very deeply" makes him feel listened to, which in turn makes him calmer and ultimately more receptive to a dialogue, says Lang, who's also a syndicated columnist, author of the recent book "The New Secrets of Charisma" and head of the training firm Charismedia.

listening is key

Relaxation techniques also can be extremely useful.

Yogic breathing — inhaling and exhaling slowly through the nose — for one or more breaths has a calming effect, allowing a person to relax so that she can decide how to respond with a clear head to a statement that angered her. Visualization exercises can complement this kind of breathing; for example, if you're upset, imagine that the air you are inhaling is black, while the air you are exhaling is a happy color, such as pink, Lang says.

Of course, it's best not to get upset to begin with. In an ideal conversation about Iraq, the first speaker has the opportunity to develop his position without being interrupted. The other participants then respond by asking something like "Is this what you're trying to tell me?" and repeat the essence of his point of view.

When that person feels that the others understand his position, he is more likely to give them the opportunity to express themselves.

It's especially important, experts say, for teachers to structure these types of conversations so that students get the chance to say what they think. "We're in a democracy, and being in a democracy means we discuss and have an open mind," Lang says. "To get to the truth, we need to listen to each other."

To make that happen, Jacobson recommends that teachers designate an object, such as a flag, indicating that only the student holding it gets to speak. When that student is through, a classmate holds it and has her turn. During this time, the others must remain silent.

After all the students have spoken for their allotted time, the teacher summarizes what's been said. He might then allow the students to talk about the themes that emerged during the discussion. And he might recommend Internet searches or other ways to tap into information so that students can become more informed and less anxious.

But there are moments when avoiding a discussion or changing the subject is appropriate.

Jacobson recommends not sharing your own opinion "unless the other person is really receptive. Because then you will get frustrated. So save your breath. If they can't hear it, don't tell it."

Don't even go there

What do New Yorkers think is the best way to argue about Iraq?

Don't even go there, some say.

"I usually try not to get into it. I don't even want to talk about it with people, because it does lead to sort of an argument," says Harold Gondrez, 52, who owns the East Village shop Mostly Bali.

"The problem is that everybody you talk to already has their opinion, and nobody really is swaying," he says. "It has happened when I've run into friends who have a different opinion, and we're not that close anymore. A friend of mine from Italy — he and I don't really talk much anymore, and it's due to 9/11" and differences over what the U.S. response should be, adds Gondrez, who doesn't want to see a war against Iraq but believes it's necessary.

Graduate student Yannie ten Broeke, who lives above Gondrez's shop, agrees. She and her boyfriend disagree about how to address the Iraqi regime and seldom discuss it. "We sort of trust that either of us has arrived at our opinions through informed means. We don't — for the sake of harmony and not beating dead horses, and the amount of time we spend together — rehash our arguments," says ten Broeke, 33, a master's candidate in forensic psychology. She says that she opposes launching a war against Iraq before exhausting diplomatic measures and winning support of other countries, while her boyfriend is in favor of a war.

Others have a more sanguine perspective on the debate.

"It's just natural that you would argue with your family; you argue all the time anyway. You argue about war, you argue about peace, you argue about everything," says Mary Wells, a 41-year-old administrative assistant from Yonkers who opposes a U.S.-Iraq war.

"I agree with my sister on most points, but we're yelling and screaming trying to get our points across," Wells says. "Whether it's the same point or a difference of opinion, [a civil conversation] is just not going to happen."

Adel Attal welcomes debate. As a 24-year-old Palestinian-American, Attal says, he gets into discussions with people every day about a possible war with Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Disagreement is what makes life go 'round, but you've gotta be civil about things," says Attal, who recommends keeping discussions about Iraq free of the emotional response he says inevitably comes when the debate is linked to 9/11.

"This is the melting pot, right here. This is where everybody meets everybody," he says. "I'm a Palestinian; I meet Israelis on a daily basis. And if every time I meet one we're going to get into a brawl, I won't live to see 30."

Strength in dialogue

When pondering how to talk constructively about whether to go to war with Iraq, consider the philosophy of the Dialogue Project.

The project's mission is to build trust and relationships among people and communities feeling tension and hostility around race, religion or ethnicity. Launched in September 2000 after the Israeli Knesset's then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited Jerusalem's Temple Mount, enraging many Muslims in the region, the Brooklyn group has since broadened its focus. Originally concentrating on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it now holds conversations about the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the prospect of a U.S.-Iraqi war. At least 700 people have participated in the monthly talks, and the project has a waiting list, says founder Marcia Kannry.

"Many of the issues are the same," Kannry says. "What is unique is our individual humanity and how we acknowledge the humanity of the person who is in deep disagreement with us."

Just how participants acknowledge differing perspectives changes over a series of 2 1/2-hour meetings. All of the 15 to 30 participants at each event — whether Jewish, Arab or otherwise — feel victimized in some way, stirring anger, sadness or guilt, Kannry says. And everyone's history plays into the assumptions they carry about the perspectives of others in the room.

Aware of this, the participants conduct a dialogue rather than a debate. It's a crucial distinction, says Kannry, because dialogue implies empathetic listening and learning, not just trying to persuade others that your position is right. Guidelines — such as allotted time for each person to speak without interruptions, and listening to each point of view with curiosity instead of assumptions — help create a productive conversation, she says.

A learned skill

"There are nasty, evil things in the world on all sides of every conflict. This is not about saying you don't deal with those people," says Kannry, noting that the war on terror and talk of military action against Iraq has at times made the project's participants frustrated, anxious and cautious in conversation.

"When you bring all the people into that conflict, when you have Iraqis and Americans creating a formula to deal with an evil Saddam Hussein, then you're dealing from strength.

"That's what dialogue does," she adds. "That takes time to learn. None of us has been raised to look at life that way."