

FAMILY MATTERS: TIBET AND CHINA

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On 31 March, the global day of action for Tibet, I joined a group of around two hundred others outside the Victorian State library. Members of the Tibetan community, many in national dress, mingled with the crowd, beneath the flags of Australia, Tibet and China. And when it was time for the speeches, every speaker extended a particular welcome to the Chinese people in our midst, including the students drifting over from nearby RMIT.

The message from speakers of every age, grandmothers through to teenagers, was absolutely consistent. Their plea was simple. Dialogue was what they wanted; for the Chinese leadership to negotiate directly with the Dalai Lama to resolve the crisis in their homeland. The speakers were at pains to emphasise that the Chinese people were not the enemy, that the day's rally was not anti-China, but rather, pro-Tibet.

Their stance originates with the Dalai Lama, whose open letter to the Chinese people was distributed that day. Pointing to the numerous historical interconnections between Tibet and China, he remains positive about the possibilities of dialogue, even in the face of violence and human rights abuses. Acknowledging that the clock can't be turned back, he argues for a 'Middle Way', not a separation of Tibet from China, but rather, autonomy within 'the family' of the People's Republic of China.

The Dalai Lama's mention of the word family got me thinking. In my day job I'm a family therapist and I spend my working life with families in conflict. For many of the people I see, home has turned into a war zone, complete with sniping, 'no-go' areas and minefields. Battle lines are drawn and combatants are ranged against each other. Sometimes there's a lengthy cold war with people frozen in battle formation for years; while in other families there is ferment and revolution. Whatever the situation, there is always much grief and a sense of 'stuckness' by the time people come to see me.

It is not the first time that the parallel between families in conflict and warring nations has come to mind. In the '80s, several colleagues and I decided to widen the scope of an upcoming family therapy conference by presenting something different. We decided to investigate whether the strategies used by family therapists in attempting to resolve conflict in families might be applicable to the political arena.

Six of us met on a regular basis in advance of the conference to see what we could come up with.

Firstly, we discussed the international scene and selected a current international conflict as our focus. Then, as now, there was no shortage of options.

Next, we each drew a country's name out of a hat. Thereafter it was our job to represent that country, to research its history and its stance on the conflict identified, with particular attention to issues we judged it might concede and those too dear to its heart for compromise.

We then appointed our most experienced, skilful member as The Grand Family Therapist, whose job it would be to run a 'live' therapy session at the conference, with the rest of us role playing 'our' countries. We were reasonably confident that we would be able to demonstrate a positive outcome. But that was before we started rehearsing.

Despite the fact that we all got on well at work, saw ourselves as rational and reasonable human beings, and had the Grand Family Therapist to facilitate our communication, the rehearsals proved shambolic. Role players shouted, talked over each other, sulked, became defensive and refused to listen. We battled on for four sessions with lots of heat and very little light.

Uncharacteristically, the Grand Family Therapist said little and looked increasingly overwhelmed. At the last rehearsal, we were no closer to resolution than we had been on night one. We decided unanimously to abandon the project. Relief all round. Anyway, I hardly gave the experience another thought until the tram ride back home after the Tibet rally.

On reflection, I believe our failure demonstrates that although there are many significant similarities between families who come for therapy and nations in conflict, sometimes the differences are more compelling.

Families do present to therapists with extreme communication problems or even total breakdown. To an outsider, it often seems unthinkable that they can continue living in that state. And on the face of it, what divides them is often a lot more obvious than the things that unite them. It's frequently differing values that bring people into therapy, be it 'the generation gap', religious or political affiliations, partner choice or lifestyle preferences.

Once there, while not denying the issues that separate, it is the counsellor's job to draw peoples' attention to the fundamental beliefs and values they share. The notion that despite appearances, the 'acorn doesn't fall far from the oak tree' can often be a significant realisation and form the basis for reconciliation.

Countries, on the other hand, may not share core values. What is fundamental to them may be sharply at odds. As we discovered during our conference rehearsals, there are issues over which some will feel it is impossible to compromise and, where this is the case, dialogue is often ineffective.

The Dalai Lama says 'our utmost concern is to safeguard Tibetan Buddhist culture – rooted as it is in the values of universal compassion – as well as the Tibetan language and the unique Tibetan identity.' The Chinese government's religious restrictions and the requirement for monks and nuns to undergo 'patriotic re-education', to deny the Dalai Lama and swear fealty to China therefore presents a huge obstacle to progress.

It is only where core values can't be shared but are nevertheless respected that dialogue has a chance. In the absence of such respect, dialogue is always difficult. Perhaps that is why, as the Dalai Lama puts it, despite the fact that there have been six rounds of talks since 2002 'on the fundamental issue, there has been no concrete result at all.'

Something else that became apparent, when reflecting on our failed experiment, is that a family therapist would not normally continue to work with a family without an understanding that abuse and violence is not acceptable. Perhaps that was why the Grand Family Therapist was stymied during our

rehearsals; she was unused to attempting to facilitate dialogue under such conditions.

Family therapists would typically call a halt to therapy until the participants demonstrated changed behaviour, because we have learned that open and honest communication is impossible in an atmosphere of threat. Obviously, the ongoing human rights violations and violence are a major impediment to meaningful dialogue between Tibet and China.

The final point I was reminded of through our failed presentation is illustrated by the Macquarie dictionary's definition of 'dialogue'. Describing dialogue as 'a state of communication between parties, countries etc', it goes on to add that 'cautious goodwill' is something the parties need to bring to the exchange to ensure a good outcome.

In my experience, goodwill can be as lacking in families coming for therapy as it is in nations approaching the negotiating table. But if it continues to be absent and it can't be activated or re-activated, the therapy is unlikely to work.

Families are often more motivated than political leaders are to change things. No matter how alienated or angry they are with each other, family members often have an investment in improving the situation – after all, they will always be related and at some point might have felt close to each other. And the very fact that they are presenting for therapy usually means that some members at least are energised around change. Learned strategies like active listening, putting oneself in another's shoes, backing off, practising respect and acknowledging small positive changes can all assist in developing goodwill or rediscovering what was once there.

The agendas of political negotiators are generally more complex than those of family members. As we know, politicians typically present at the negotiation table with very strong vested interests and national pride at stake. The countries we therapists played weren't prepared to budge and despite the lengthy debate, the situation remained unchanged.

Communication in the absence of respect, understanding and goodwill is unlikely to lead to sustained change. It can just mean that countries go through the motions in the hope that the external pressure will eventually subside. It will be interesting to see what happens with the recently initiated talks in Schenzen once the Olympics are over.

Goodwill and respect were very evident on that grassy knoll outside the library. The three flags, the welcome, the inclusive language all signalled the willingness of the Tibetan community, whatever its private pain, to extend the hand of peace. This degree of forbearance is unusual in today's world. We can only hope that it will be rewarded, and fears about the limitations on dialogue in the context of Tibet and China will not be realised.

Maybe, in choosing the family analogy, the Dalai Lama was exhibiting his characteristic wisdom. One thing family therapists experience with regularity is that where people treasure their family affiliations, discover their shared values and find a way to convey respect and understanding, massive and unexpected changes are achievable.