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Leadership Essay Contest

April 13, 2019

“Conflict in Human Rights – Necessary or Not?”

In March of 2019, I got into my first internet “fight” of my adult career. It was the day that a jury in Pittsburgh found the former police officer, Michael Rosfeld not guilty of all charges in the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Antwon Rose. The local news station was covering a story about hundreds of high school students who had walked out of their classes to protest the not-guilty conviction of this police officer. I commented on the article. I stated how proud I was of these children. I think I said something along the lines of, “this is how change happens.” Within seconds, my comment was taken over by dozens of people making statements like, “As soon as someone doesn’t get their way, they hit the streets with a protest sign” and “Being out on the streets acting like a fool isn’t going to change the verdict.” These comments from these people completely surprised me. I wondered if they knew that many of the freedoms that they take for granted now, were paid for with the pain of our ancestors and available to us because of their actions and resistance. I said some things online that I’m not proud of, but the message that I was trying to get across was: Nothing unjust has been changed in our history without the people that are willing to revolt against those injustices. That small conflict was worth it. There is no right, no freedom, and no justice without the conflict that preceded. Conflict is (usually) a necessary part of the fight to obtain (and maintain) Human Rights.

Most believe that, as humans, we are born with certain fundamental rights. Some of these include, but are not limited to, the right to live life in freedom and safety, the right to freedom of thought and expression, the right to democracy and the ability to have a say in who we want as leaders, and the right to trial and to not be unfairly detained. The United Nations drafted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948 and outlined many of the human rights that we understand today. This was not a binding agreement but outlined international thoughts about what “Human Rights” should include. Some nations refrained from signing and some nations (the United States) have failed to ratify the document for many years. There is conflict even in the definitions of these human rights. The conflicts that have taken place in our history, while humans were struggling to come to terms with concepts such as “fair” and “right” and “freedom,” are the precipitating factors that are driving the nations to define “Human Rights.”

Historically, there has been conflict in many forms surrounding the interpretation of Human Rights. For example, in the right to live life in freedom and safety, what does “freedom and safety” mean? Who does it include? To one culture, it may mean the right to autonomy – to choose our own living situations and the people whom we associate with. We would naturally choose the environments in which we feel safe. In another culture or nation, the right to freedom and safety might be interpreted to mean that we have the right to defend ourselves against anything that is perceived to threaten our safety and freedom. This is an example of when our interpretations of Human Rights could possibly infringe on another person’s rights. In the interpretation of these Human Rights, there are many places for conflict. Without this conflict, we would not be being pressed to work toward a more unified understanding, thus securing rights for individual groups.

Human Rights include a protection for women against sex-based inequality. This protection has been in place for years but is constantly being challenged. It's well known that in America in 1920, women earned the right to vote. It isn't as widely discussed that black women were marginalized in the Women's Suffrage Movement, and in some states didn't receive the right to vote until the 1960's. Questions arise around the supposed equality of all people, when subjugated groups of individuals aren't included in the phrase "all people." If it weren't for this conflict, the Black Suffrage Movement may not have taken hold. Also, because of this conflict, ALL women did not get the right to vote for 40+ more years.

There were layers of conflict in the Women's Suffrage Movement, including internal conflict regarding how women were going to go about getting the vote. Conflict preceded the Suffrage Movement, as well, when women gathered in the mid 1800's and realized they weren't going to get the protections that they were entitled to until they secured the right to vote. In this instance, conflict manifested itself in the form of rallies, protests, and direct actions. These conflicts were a necessary part of obtaining women's rights. They were the driving force behind the changes that occurred. Also, because of these conflicts and injustices, many women suffered.

As above, there are still women who are not being afforded these rights. All over the world there are women oppressed under male dominated regimes, being owned as property, suffering their "fate" of FGM, and being killed in honor killings. If these women were born with the same fundamental right to remain free from harm, why aren't they being protected? I believe that these conflicts (that infringe upon the rights of others) are not necessary to the fight for Human Equality, but sadly they are happening regardless. While they are happening, organizations and groups continue to revolt and take direct action to protect these groups of women from these atrocities.

Another historical example of conflict in the fight for human rights are found in the Labor Movement. In the early 1800's, (mostly immigrant) American's worked in horrendous work environments. Dangerous conditions, long hours, low wages, and no benefits, created the atmosphere of rage and upheaval. People suffered in poverty and ill-health, and many died as a result of these situations. People were no longer willing to work in these atmospheres and created unions that would protect them from these situations. There was conflict motivating these changes and there remains conflict today, as many people around the world continue to work in horrible environments and are suffering immensely. Those people maintain the same right to remain free from harm as people who are working in a Union, yet that right is not being afforded to them.

I say that conflict is a "necessary" part of the struggle toward Human Rights in reference to every single human who has ever raised their voice and screamed, "This isn't right!" I believe that the conflicts that have spurred change are those that have been beneficial and necessary. If it weren't for these upheavals and resistance in the place of acceptance, many of the victories in our history wouldn't have taken place. There have been unnecessary conflicts that have infringed on the rights of others but have still created change. The struggle for me lies in the nagging question, "Were they worth it?" Is achieving knowledge or understanding worth great losses and sacrifices?

There are conflicts that I do not feel were necessary in the past and that I don't think would benefit our future. Armed conflict goes against humans' rights to remain free from harm. It is a conflict that infringes on another's ability to hold the same right. I believe that these types

of conflicts are not only detrimental to us as human beings but hinder progress towards equality and rights for all. I don't believe that going to war is ever necessary. Sadly, World War 2 prompted the United Nations to draft the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. While I don't think that armed conflict was necessary, I do believe that it preceded the urgent need for the UN and to start the conversation about what Human Rights are, and how we can ensure they are being afforded to all humans.

I feel like I could continue writing this essay forever and never come up with an answer or solution. Conflict and Human Rights seem to have been traveling together through most of our history -for good and for bad. It's unknown if one could exist without the other. In my earlier example about Antwon Rose and Michael Rosfeld, both of their Human Rights are pertinent. Antwon Rose had the right to life and to remain free from harm and that was taken from him. Michael Rosfeld had the right to trial and to not be unfairly detained right. That was afforded to him. One could say that Human Rights are a privilege that not all get to have. And further, when some get to have them, they may get them at the expense of others loss.

There are two things that I believe to be the truth: 1.) One day, Human Rights will be afforded to all humans on this planet and 2.) The path to get there will be filled with conflict. I believe that our only hope is to join hands with our fellows, keep marching forward, and pick up anyone who needs us along the way.