

Fearful Words
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Last week, I was reading my Facebook account and came across this story, posted by a colleague of mine, for whom I have the utmost respect and admiration. He wrote this:

“I went to see a movie at a theater near where we live (the movie was so bad I am not even going to say what it was.) About twenty minutes into it, I was bored. So, without giving it much thought, I stood up and started screaming "Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!" Well, you should have seen the chaos that ensued. People running, jumping over seats, pushing, shoving. It was utter mayhem.

When we got outside some people who evidently were seated near me recognized that I was the one who had yelled out and they confronted me. Here's what was so strange: they were so upset. They had taken what I said seriously and were honestly afraid. And, there, out in the parking lot, they were all yelling at me, pointing their fingers, saying all kinds of nasty things.

I tried to say, more than once, "Hey, if for some reason what I said bothered you, I'm sorry. I guess maybe I'm not so proud of it." But I also tried to explain that people say those kinds of things all the time.

But, these hysterical people just wouldn't let up. Over and over they just kept yelling at me. One guy, some big loser, had tears in his eyes. He put his sorry face right in mine and said, repeatedly, "Why? Why? Why? I tried, one more time, to explain. "Hey, pal, lighten up, how 'bout it? You know what? It was just theater talk."

What are you feeling right now? Probably the same thing I was feeling when I read this post: shock, dismay, outrage. I thought my colleague had lost his mind. I was prepared to type a sharp and critical reply born out of my absolute astonishment that he could do such a thing. I fleetingly wondered

if this was a chargeable offense. And then, I realized how perfectly and masterfully I had been hoodwinked. He was, of course, commenting on the most recent debacle to hit the news; language that was dismissed as “locker room talk.” My colleague did not actually use words to create fear and panic in the public, but his post served up a double whammy; it commented on the power of speech to create chaos and the potential for real physical harm, while simultaneously reminding me of how easy it is to believe something to be true if it's written without commentary or deeper reflection. Had I not stopped to think about his post, I would have dashed off an email of reproach, causing a rift in our relationship and embarrassing myself before I realized he was using a well known metaphor – crying fire in a crowded movie theatre – to make a point.

That point, of course, is that words matter. Not only what we say matters, but how we say it, when we say it, and to whom we say it. What struck me in this morning's reading was Marilyn McElvery's insistence that “caring for language is a moral issue.” We know there is a connection between the words we use and the kind of environment that is created by those words. We know that storm of deceitful and dishonest words can create a mob. We know that inspiring words can beckon us to our best selves. In this season leading up to a presidential election, many of us have been alternately fascinated and disgusted by the ways in which hurtful words have been spoken, then the hurt flatly denied, despite evidence to the contrary. We have been alarmed by the ways that the advertising of all political parties use words to manipulate, to control and incite fear. To be fair and balanced, I will also say that in this campaign season we have also heard words that inspire us, that remind us of who we are as a people, as a

nation, and as human beings; words that recall us to our best selves.

Across the social and political spectrum, there is a great deal of confusion and anger about what we think but don't say, what we should say, but don't; and what we do say, but shouldn't. Although it's tempting to devote this entire sermon to exploring this issue solely on the secular and political level, we're a religious community – and that means our primary business is not to talk politics but to talk about the underlying moral and spiritual values that underlay our politics and that motivate us to act politically.

Some of the tools we use to do that are found in our religious history, tradition and ancient texts. Words mattered to the world's great religious and spiritual teachers, especially in the West. Believers in the three Abrahamic faiths are often called “the people of the book” and take the words in their books very seriously. Speaking of dietary laws, Jesus is said to have told his followers, “it's not what you put into your mouth that matters, but what comes out of it.” The same advice comes from Eastern faiths. The story we heard today for all ages reminded us that Buddha taught that “right speech” is a part of his fourth noble truth that shows the practical day to steps to live a life of integrity and happiness. The Buddhist Teacher Thanissaro Bhikku writes “If you can't control your mouth, there's no way you can hope to control your mind.” Wise words for these times of intemperate speech.

This morning's sermon is entitled “Fearful Words,” as part of our monthly theme: “tell me a story about a time when you faced your fears,” and among some of the many everyday things that there are to be afraid of – saying the wrong thing ranks pretty high. To be human is to make mistakes and all of us, at some time or another, will say the wrong thing. But what is “the wrong thing, and how do we know it's the wrong thing?” This is the question that undergirds the ongoing national conversation about what is unfortunately called “political correctness”. It's unfortunate that this term is used the way it is because this is actually a conversation about power, and who gets to use the power to give names to what happens in our world. Deciding which words will be used to describe what happens around us is critical. It is intimately

connected to our confusion, frustration and anger about language; about power, and who gets to say what and to whom.

A couple weeks ago I was talking to a group of young Canadian men who were staying at the same hotel as me. We were all hanging out at the pool and somehow the topic came up about First Nations people. One young man looked askance and then said “look, I know it's not politically correct to say this, but those (expletive) Indians are draining the Canadian economy.” He then went on to detail all the ways that he shouldn't have to pay for their “upkeep.” What was seductive about the conversation was that by saying “this isn't politically correct” it was as if he were inviting me into a secret club – a club, in this case, of white people who are in agreement with certain premises but who can't say it out loud because it's not politically correct. This is the same argument that is fueling our current debates about political correctness – it's a way of saying “I know I shouldn't say this- but – you understand because you're “one of us.” One of the things that the liberal church has done is to ask “and who is “one of us?” Us includes not just white people of course, or people who drive Prius' or listen to NPR, but people who have black and brown skin, people who are otherly abled, people who identify as Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Jews and atheists who have found a home in a Unitarian Universalist congregation; transgender and gender queer and gay and lesbian, Native Americans and all “those” people who too often find themselves on the other side of that young, able-bodied white man's statement prefaced by “It's not politically correct to say this...but...” Using “political correctness” as a kind of censorship against free speech has built a coalition of people who claim to be fed up with political correctness. The backlash against political correctness is not about free speech; instead at the heart of this backlash is fear – fear of a changing culture in which power is distributed differently. More importantly than that, however, I would say it is also a fear of opening our hearts to one another as an act of radical love for all humankind.

There's a postscript to the story of the young Canadian man I met in the pool. When I challenged his assumption that First Nation's People being a

drain on Canadian society, he quickly added, with great sincerity, “and, I understand that we messed them up bad. And I get that we’re paying the cost of that now.” I was frankly shocked to hear him say this. I did not expect that kind of acknowledgement from him. I believe that in this instance, my words were able to challenge the assumption that I was part of his “we”, and suggest that maybe we were both a part of a bigger “we”. It reminded me that the words we choose to speak can have consequences for ill or for good. Our words matter. They matter in the larger culture and they matter to our religious institutions.

Of course, we know that here in this church – no, I mean fellowship. Sorry. For the first year I was with you, I was working for a church in Cleveland and there would be many times that I would slip and call The Fellowship, a “church” – and some of you would remind me, gently of course, that you weren’t a church. In one of our recent newcomer orientations, a person asked about the name of the Fellowship and why it was a fellowship. I told her it was because of two reasons; historically, when this group began, the founders of the Fellowship were intentional to distinguish it from being identified as a church with all the accompanying Protestant style trappings of “a church.” But then it was also a gesture of inclusiveness; that for humanist, atheists and those with a Jewish heritage, to belong to a “church” felt exclusive to them. That’s why for much of the first fifty years of the life of our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, with the exception of some historically Christian-identified UU churches, much of the traditional Protestant-sounding religious language was abolished in favor of more secular substitutes. Sermons became messages; prayers became meditations or reflections; calls to worship became opening words and hymns became songs. The belief that stripping our religious institution of religious language was well intentioned. It reminds me of the current controversy of college campuses about “trigger warnings”, that is, about whether some topics in classes are so emotionally charged for some people that they deserve to be warned in advance when the topic will be discussed. In trying to create a safe haven for those who longed for a spiritual community of like-minded people but were

suspicious of “religion” and “religious institutions” and who had been hurt by those who spout “religious language” we would issue our own version of trigger warnings or censor out traditional religious language altogether.

At a retreat of our worship leaders earlier this fall, I actually asked the question: “Are there trigger words, other than “church,” that I shouldn’t say at the Fellowship?” They were quick to come up with a list; some light-hearted and others serious. “I think if you talked sin and salvation, that would be a challenge for this congregation.” “God,” said one. “I don’t think you could get away with much God-talk.” “No, I think it’s easier to talk about God than Jesus,” said another. “I wouldn’t talk about Jesus here at the Fellowship.” “Prayer,” said yet another. “I’m uncomfortable with prayer.” It’s the classic UU preacher’s dilemma (oh, wait, that’s another word that’s hard for some to hear – preacher or preaching!) Our preacher’s dilemma is how to speak powerfully and specifically using the most evocative religious language that avoids offending or creating emotional distance; or, even worse, hurting or wounding the diversity of backgrounds and needs that we represent. I don’t know if other faith traditions struggle with this as much as Unitarian Universalists do, but I suspect not. There is a common language among the Christian and Jewish traditions, and while they may differ on interpretation, there is an assumption that we know what we’re talking about when we say “Jesus loves me,” or “God is good.”

Not so with Unitarian Universalists. We like to say “to question is the answer,” which means we don’t make quick assumptions about language and “what we all mean.” I think this is a strength of the liberal church, and by church, I refer to the Greek definition of “the body of people called out and called together.” Back in 2003, when the then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Reverend Bill Sinkford, spoke of the need for a “language of reverence,” or, reclaiming religious language in services, his words were met with a firestorm of controversy. Words have the power to include or to exclude; to define who is in power and who has control over what is said and how and when it’s said. The theists among us rejoiced that finally, someone in authority in the UUA had said

in public that they could sing Christmas Carols and Easter Hymns that weren't stripped of Jesus without feeling like bad UU's; the atheists among us felt threatened by a powerful person suggesting that ministers should feel free to impose language into services that did not reflect their beliefs. Poor Bill Sinkford! He doesn't have the power to impose anything. He was just trying to start a conversation – and I guess what we keep learning over and over again is that conversation can scare or anger people.

Why am I telling you this now ancient UU history from 2013? Because throughout this year, I expect I'll be using explicitly religious language every so often from the pulpit. Maybe your next minister might like to do that occasionally as well. I enjoy exploring traditional words like God, prayer, sin, salvation, hope, using our liberal religious lens, but I won't assume that you know what I'm talking about without unpacking every one of those words. I also won't make claims about what those words mean for "all of us," because words live within a specific context and their meaning cannot be assumed. I hope that if I use any words that are disturbing or troubling to you, I will do it in a way that invites deeper conversation. When political correctness or trigger warnings are thrown out as a knee jerk reaction to something we worry will be troubling, it can shut down any conversation about the real question that's behind all this sensitivity, and that question is "Where does it hurt?" How does this word trigger a series of stories or memories that have caused you to feel shame or blame; anger or mistrust? This is the hard work – the heart work of our spiritual life, together; to discern the power of words to help, to heal or to harm our spirit.

So, there are some things which we might say which we shouldn't - not because we might get caught by the PC police but because it does not represent that which is best about us as human beings. There are some things that we don't say – that we probably should. To remain silent in the face of homophobic, racist, sexist comments implies a tacit approval of them. We must train ourselves to speak the truth with love, but to speak the truth nonetheless, even when it's uncomfortable. Even when you would rather just have a nice dinner with

your extended family and are hoping that politics doesn't enter into the mealtime discussion.

There's another whole dimension to this exploration about words we should say, or might like to say, but has little to do with the current political climate, and that takes us in a more personal direction. The words for those things which we carry inside us are often hard to find and express. We have deep feelings which we may long to bring forth, but are fearful of saying them out loud. I'm talking about love here; a word that risks being trivialized by overuse.

The overuse of words can rob them of their power. Love is one such word. People seem to easily express love for objects; we hear it every day in ordinary conversation and in commercials. But to express love for other people - that's much harder. As I've been thinking about this part of the sermon, about words we want to say but so often don't, I kept hearing the words to a Paul Simon song in my head. In his 1973 song "Something So Right," Simon sings "*Some people never say the words 'I love you.' It's not their style to be so bold. Some people never say those words I love you, but like a child, they're longing to be told.*" I'm a mid-westerner born from Hungarian/Croatian immigrants on one side, and hard-scrabble Tennessee farmers on the other, not cultures known for their outward expressions of affection. We never said "I love you" as part of our family life, and while I knew it was at the core of my parent's love, I don't recall it ever being spoken. It was assumed. You should just know.

One thing I deeply appreciate about my mid-western, Hungarian-Tennessee roots is that love is not something to be taken lightly or frivolously expressed. The way we show love of course, is by our deeds; the way in which dad fixes the car without saying a word; the way the husband surprises his overworked beloved with a vacation; the thousands of miles that parents drive their children to school and lessons and trips and soccer tournaments not out of a love for the sport, but for that lopsided grin that greets them at the end of the day. We don't say "I love you" because we know it's fraught with all layers of meaning and possible expectation. Does it commit me to you? Is it awkward if I don't say it too? What if I don't love

you back? Words matter and perhaps those three little words “I love you” matters more than any other words that we fear speaking.

I wish we had more leaders who could speak the language of love in the public sphere. Perhaps it’s too much to hope for, that in the tweets and sound bites and the full speeches that nobody but those who attend the rallies ever hear, there might be found a language of love that transcends political parties and personalities. Maybe it’s going to be more like my family. The love that we express politically has to be shown through our actions.

I tend to be circumspect and shy, I will admit, with the words I love you, reserving them too often for the grand gesture, or for when it really,

really counts. These days, as we traverse this difficult political season, I am feeling more and more that it really, really counts right now. Our roots as Unitarian Universalists, but particularly as Universalists, reminds us that the antidote to fear is love, and that however we express the love we feel, for each other, for this life we share, for this country, however we express it, through words or through actions -- saying “I love you” are words that we really don’t need to fear – and it’s how we, together, will stand up to it. May it be so.

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