

“Knowing the Truth”

You may remember that in my last sermon, devoted to the history of nonviolence and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy, I quoted Gandhi’s assertion that “All men are the same self in different form. If the same, then equally important . . . their needs are equally important.” (Crawford, Civil Disobedience, pg. 182) I said then: “the Love in nonviolence is central to the power of social change struggles, because it leverages morality for change. The moral high ground is Love professed even for one’s enemies; Love expressed toward others undercuts demonization.” I described Gandhi’s attempt to interact lovingly, even with his enemies, in order to arrive at Truth.

In response to the Rev. Tet Gallardo’s sermon last Sunday, “How Shall We Study UU History?”, I will consider the place of compassionate communication in Unitarian Universalism. Parent Effectiveness Training—a nonjudgmental communication style for speaking and responding compassionately--was pretty popular in the 50’s through the 70’s, the Golden Age of Unitarian Universalist religious education. In that era, curriculum units on sexuality, finding your true vocation, assertiveness, and understanding other faiths seemed to flow out of headquarters in a nurturing stream. Thomas Gordon, who formulated Parent Effectiveness Training, PET, was the consultant for a UU General Assembly and week-long PET courses were taught at several Religious Education conferences in the 1970’s. My wife, Sarita, and I took a PET course in 1973, at Ferry Beach Conference Center in Maine.

I, and others, thought (rather naively) Parent Effectiveness Training would revolutionize not only parenting and religious education but communicating for everyone since the transferable skills would lessen business, congregational, and marital friction. Here is an earnest—if rather stilted--example of non-judgmental empathy according to PET. Thomas Gordon wrote that it “came out of [his] daughter’s mouth one morning at breakfast before she left for junior high school”:

DAUGHTER: “Daddy, what did you like in girls when you were a boy?”

(He said): I was tempted to reminisce about my boyhood. Fortunately, I caught myself . . .

FATHER: Sounds like you're wondering what you need in order to get boys to like you, is that right?

DAUGHTER: Yeah, for some reason they don't seem to like me, and I don't know why . . .

FATHER: You're puzzled why they don't seem to like you.

DAUGHTER: Well, I know I don't seem to talk much. I'm afraid to talk in front of boys.

FATHER: You just can't seem to open up and be relaxed with boys.

DAUGHTER: Yeah. I'm afraid I will say something that will make me look silly to them.

This dialogue went on for several more exchanges until his daughter decided: "I guess you just have to take a chance." (Thomas Gordon, P.E.T. In Action, pp. 80-81)

Nonviolent Communication took up where Parent Effectiveness Training left off. The development of responsive listening beyond a somewhat awkward summarizing listening style came from Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent, or Compassionate Communication. He draws a distinction between what we value and critical, moralistic judgments. We value certain qualities in life—peace, love, honesty— "how life can best be served. We make negative moralistic judgments of people and behaviors that fail to support our value judgments, e.g., 'Violence is bad. People who kill others are evil.' [Rosenberg further contends] Had we been raised speaking a language that facilitated the expression of compassion, we would have learned to articulate our needs and values directly . . ." (Marshall Rosenberg, NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION, pg. 17)

Professor O.J. Harvey at the University of Colorado found that acts of violence were more frequent in cultures whose literature frequently contained words that classify and judge people. Common sense supports this, as we have

recently seen a huge upsurge in the polarized labeling of groups of people for political gain. “Yesterday, police departments and Jewish organizations across the U.S. braced for antisemitic confrontations after reports of ne-Nazi groups organizing a “National Day of Hate.” Online organizers were instructing likeminded individuals to drop banners, place stickers and flyers, or scrawl graffiti as a form of biased so-called action.” (C.A. Bridges, “The Daytona Beach News-Journal”) This is as appalling as when Vladimir Putin used quasi-Nazi labels to justify invading Ukraine. Andrew Schmookler at Harvard claimed “that at the base of all violence--whether verbal, psychological, or physical, whether among family members, tribes, or nations—is a kind of thinking that attributes the cause of conflict to wrongness in ones adversaries . . . [with] a corresponding inability to think of oneself or others in terms of vulnerability—what one might be feeling, fearing, yearning for, missing. etc.” (Rosenberg, NVC, pg. 18)

The vast majority of couples who come to see me for therapy say they need help with communication. Consider a hypothetical couple, George and Mary, who try or want to talk about their feelings. But when Mary says what she feels she almost always is evaluating or interpreting George, saying that she feels that George is obnoxious and unlovable in some way, and George responds likewise. She says: “I feel that you are a cross-eyed skunk,” or other words of that nature. And George responds with: “I feel like you are a [blankety-blank].” Neither has committed themselves to the vulnerability of saying what they feel inside, such as sad, hurt, distressed, discouraged, etc. Of course, there is always going to be some of that in any relationship where the primitive parts of the brain are activated. But where communication is almost always a negative evaluation or demeaning observation there is alienation. Each speaker is discounting the other or negatively interpreting the other, but not revealing their feelings. Nor is the listener responsively listening to the other’s feelings. They seem not to be curious about each other.

Listening closely and responding with what you think they may be saying, is key to compassionate communication. When you respond with a summary of what you think they are saying, the other person gets to either feel heard or can

correct what you said. You can know them more truly for who they are. A real engagement takes place.

Curiosity is part of what brought most of us to this religion and FUSW, your chosen faith, so perhaps curiosity is useful to you. In the context of strengthening our bond with one another, perhaps you think you know someone well—your partner, friend, congregant, a casual stranger. And perhaps you did know them yesterday or last week, but banking on old knowledge is like investing your retirement based on last year's market—not your best move. We can all benefit by approaching people with a genuine interest and curiosity. We can be vulnerable about our feelings, and not just our hurt, but our joy, hope, and contentment. This works when you have enough trust and safety that you can hear the other person and feel that they hear you.

We don't always feel like being curious; not when we are tired or worried. Probably not when we are late to Sunday services, maybe driving a little too fast, and our car gets cut off by another car. Perhaps that flash of anger, that characterization of the other as a jerk, zips through your mind. Okay. This falls into the Nobody's Perfect category or the You're Only Human Category. Let me break the ice here and admit that when somebody cuts me off on the highway my primitive brain knows exactly their lower order of intelligence. Self-righteous anger releases pleasant feelings into the psyche. I can feel so VERY right, so on top-of-my-game, that the actual situation may escape my notice.

Or we hear a simple description of a problem and resort to what I call "guy's disease" (because men do this more often than women); it consists of suggesting a strategy to resolve a problem before speaking and hearing feelings: "You should just . . . tell him off, or get a new job, or move to Montana, or . . . just about anything." Within the Mary and George couple, George imposed a strategy of restricting Mary's credit access to only one credit card. He hadn't told her of his fear or fatigue, and she hadn't told him of her feeling trapped and misunderstood. They just fought about concepts like "over-controlling" and "freedom." We need, here, to carefully speak our feelings to each other long before suggesting

strategies or changes in strategy. With a deep understanding of each other's feelings we can know more of the truth and devise innovative strategies together.

The most effective strategy for speaking one's feelings in an uncomfortable situation is "When you, I feel, because": When you----- (fill in the blank with a specific action), I feel----- (fill in the blank with a feeling like hurt, sad, fearful, etc.), because----- (fill in the blank with what it meant to you). When you do THAT, I feel THIS, because it MEANS to me. For example, Mary could have said: "When you don't consult me about money, I feel sad and hurt, because it means to me you don't trust me." If George responds with a summary of Mary's statement and then goes on to say: "When you overspend I feel frightened because it means to me that you don't respect my hard work." They have begun a dialogue about the truth, not about each other's moral standing.

More UU History: In 2010, the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly responded to America's invasion of several Middle Eastern countries by passing a resolution entitled: "Statement of Conscience: Creating Peace." It recommended "Creating Peace in Our Congregations" by "developing Peace Teams to provide training in compassionate communication and conflict resolution," and "working through our lifespan religious education structures to provide workshops on conflict resolution and compassionate communication." (pps.8-9) The relationship between political peace efforts and compassionate communication training was clear to the General Assembly delegates. By thinking and feeling compassionately on a daily and weekly basis, the typical reaction in times of stress is likely to be peaceful. Caring to know each other as complex, multi-dimensional people gives us empathy for each other.

I must have missed the creation of Peace Teams at FUSW, but we did have a workshop on conflict resolution about 18 months ago. This congregation has endorsed compassionate communication through, for example, Candles of Joy and Concern spoken by members and friends themselves. Some other congregations have diminished Candles of Joy and Concern because of complaints about people going on too long, or speaking frivolously, or sharing too intimately. They filter the candles through writing in a book, giving them to someone who

summarizes, or passing them in written form to the minister. Even though it's not always easy, we are a tolerant bunch, and hearing the candles directly from those who are living their joys or worries bonds us more closely than a sanitized recitation or an abstractly validated acknowledgment.

We have also steadfastly defended sharing with each other—as part of the worship service—after the sermon. We all know that some ministers have found that to be so anxiety-provoking that it was difficult for them to hear people, but over the years I have witnessed (with a few, very rare exceptions) a real caring in congregants' reflections. That we encourage such sharing makes my heart glad for the way we listen to each other seriously.

When we get together and share our concerns in program group planning meetings, others can recognize our feelings and speak of their own. This is part of how we will heal from pandemic loneliness. Program groups give everyone a chance to speak from the heart to important issues. Everyone in the congregation can hear and ponder insights from fellow congregants, a rare event in other congregations.

You might wonder why I am making a big deal out of compassion and empathy. UUs are late to the game. Jewish scriptures had recommended the Golden Rule centuries before Jesus and Buddhists were saying compassion is the ultimate good many centuries ago. We have some catching up to do. We are a young faith group that is full of good faith but inexperienced in strategies. We can genuinely pursue peace and compassion in a very direct, democratic way. We need to share our feelings, listen responsively, and state our needs openly. May we continue.