

Dialogue

Today, I am taking off from John Freund's recent pulpit presentation, in which he used music and words to communicate the emotional resonance that we have with each other, even when we are consciously unaware of being affected or affecting others. I will expand on some of the themes he introduced, such as how we communicate compassionately. Incidentally, this year I may sometimes respond to other speakers and program groups. Further, I will expand on my opinions in sermons but also try to engage with different viewpoints. This is not only a dialogue with John Freund, and with you, but also with those who would disagree with my viewpoint. Ministry, and religion in this time, needs to be about personal engagement with each other, with our environment, and with values.

I have also established a Ministerial Relations Committee that wants to hear from you if you think some change is in order, or you like something a lot, or you want a new feature in our community. Craig, Adelaide, and Jane have agreed to let me know if something needs my attention. They will also tell you when something needs attention by the community. These are all efforts to knit together a dialogue.

Trump and Facebook have worked at fragmenting social discussion in our deeply divided country by emphasizing angry division. Conflicting political issues have been exacerbated in order to define us as very different people from each other, as if views on same-sex or transgender issues, abortion, and mask-wearing make us essentially different kinds of people from different nations and even from each other here. Trump, on June 1, 2020, performed a “religious ritual” of sorts by ordering that peaceful demonstrators be tear-gassed out of a neutral space near the White House. He marched to stand in front of an Episcopal church that had not invited him and brandished a Christian Bible upside down, signaling his loyalty to an evangelical Christian base. The Rev. Marion Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C., expressed her shock and pain that Trump used the Bible “as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.” (Catherine Brekus, “Donald Trump, the bible, and White Supremacy,” pg. 1)

The counter-argument to malignant division is that Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and others have taught some version of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These religions have not preached butterflies and rainbows, but pragmatically noted how “experience showed that it worked. They discovered that greed and selfishness were the cause of our personal misery. When we gave them up, we

were happier.” (Karen Armstrong, “Compassion’s Fruit,” AARP, March & April, 2005, pg.1). If Unitarian Universalists are to offer a healing message in this polarized atmosphere, we must offer a pragmatic means for mutual respect.

After the service a couple of weeks ago, June Sidman pointed out to John Freund that what he described was similar to Nonviolent Communication, also termed Compassionate Communication (Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication). Nonviolence is often traced to Gandhi, who saw Truth as the goal to be pursued through the practice of Love. He recognized that there are way-stations of partial truths along the way to the never-fully-achieved Truth itself, and that treating others gently was how we could reclaim the “natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart. While we may not consider the way we talk to be “violent,” our words often lead to hurt and pain, whether for ourselves or others.” (Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication, pg. 3). Compassion signals that dialogue could be possible.

Dialogue is the conversation between two or more persons that tries to reach an amicable settlement or resolution. The first step in dialogue is to check in with yourself to see how you are feeling, and if you are feeling angry, aggressive, or belligerent. Just be aware that this will emerge if you don’t first

identify your own hurt, sadness, or fear. When I have felt the need to react angrily to aggression, I have found it helpful to first locate my own vulnerable feelings but not react in kind. A while back I called my brother but his wife picked up his phone. She had previously attempted to isolate him from me, his sister, and daughters, and due to his worsening dementia, he could not call anyone. She quickly managed to convey her love of rural Kentucky as opposed to the crowded, liberal New York area. Fortunately, having known her a little, I expected that kind of thing and simply reflected back that she apparently finds joy in a quiet neighborhood. That de-escalated her apparent tension.

Thic Nhat Han said: "The most precious gift you can give to the one you love is your true presence. . . .Those who have practiced Buddhist meditation know that meditating is above all being present: to yourself, to those you love, to life." Being present to yourself is achieved through various forms of introspection, such as quiet meditation or meditative walks in the woods, if they enhance compassion. However, there is a counter-argument presented by Deepak Chopra: "it is useless to engage in certain debates . . .There are simply some confrontations that are not worth it. . . .Walk away any time you detect an impasse. Anything else is futile. . . . Subjects such as religion and ideology are a fixed world-view." (Nicole Pajer, "Before Arguments Boil, He Reduces the Heat,"

The New York Times, 10/04/2020) I had a mixed response to the view that I should exit if the other person seems closed to change. Realistically, yes, let go of an encounter where a give-and-take that sensitively informs both of you about a greater truth has clearly failed. Then, I realized that I had simply missed something in plain sight: Mr. Chopra was photographed twice for the article, and in both of them he was standing alone, in dark glasses, his hands clasped behind his back, in a bleakly isolated seascape and landscapes 98% desolate of vegetation. He looks avoidant, but I won't just walk away. Failing to at least try for dialogue diminishes both Truth and Love pre-emptively. Curiosity motivates me to inquire about the feelings of another person. Combative ideology and religion may be the content of someone's speech but may merely represent some unrecognized hurt or fear. Without engaging enough to explore feelings under the verbiage, relationships die.

Sometimes, when faced with truculent opposition, it helps to examine the process. Some people feel themselves to be backed up against the wall by hearing a differing opinion, having confused their opinions with their identity. At that point, it can be useful to discuss the basis for dialogue. Does the other want to be heard deeply? Does the other recognize compassion as a good thing? For example, if you remember my call to my brother which was intercepted by his

wife, she said she “hates” the liberal commentator he was viewing on their local Public Broadcasting System. I responded by noting that: “the liberals I know are in favor of Love.” She paused, and her voice tone dropped lower. She gave the phone to my brother. For another example, I was attempting to engage with someone who suddenly strung together a list of Fox News talking points. I waited until she paused, and then observed that her voice tone and cadence had both escalated, so perhaps there is another purpose this content serves. She looked inward then, and acknowledged that her anxiety had escalated. She was protecting her self-esteem.

Political demonstrations are all about attending to the process of dialogue. Marches, petitions, vigils, etc. are about recognizing that someone has not engaged with those who suffer from injustice. I remember demonstrating against one war or another in downtown White Plains when a young black man joined us and repeatedly shouted to passing cars: “Not in MY voice.” I was initially confused, but then realized he had succinctly summarized our message. He stood with us and wanted HIS voice heard also. Two years ago, the four-foot dreidel that was installed each year next to a Christmas tree on Pleasantville land was stolen. Within a day the Pleasantville Clergy Association had organized a candlelight vigil for the installation of a new, six-foot dreidel and a hundred

people showed up. This is a kind of dialogue too, in which people of many faiths supported each other and said that stealing another's symbol is not to be tolerated. For another example, when the Chappaqua Friends Meeting's Black Lives Matter banner was burned and the replacement stolen, the Quakers' clerk asked for my help. I lobbied the Pleasantville Clergy Association to put out a letter of support that was printed in the local newspaper. In both cases, opposing viewpoints could have responded in kind, because we had defined the terms of dialogue as civil discourse. Nonviolent Communication is all about hearing--and then being heard equally. In these examples, we heard violence and responded with compassion. Once empathy has been established from me to you, or you to another, then perhaps dialogue may commence by sharing your own vulnerability and opinions.

Finally, I am acutely aware that the loss of our home on Old Jackson Avenue is a cause for great unhappiness. Many people have talked to me about their grief, their sense of rootlessness, and fear that without a specific place to hang our hats that we lose our identity. I understand that there are dimensions to this grief we will still discover, as time unfolds and memories surface. We have had beautiful trees and grass to look at when the sermon was boring, and could feel a rare, comforting oneness with nature. We remember how, soon after the last

flood, our youth wanted their bridging ceremony in the sanctuary that was barely tolerable because that was the place they remembered fondly. We remember how weddings, memorials, and dedications felt in that particular place. It pains me deeply that the feelings I have identified with that place must now take to the road. This is also a very hard time in the partial recovery process at the Old Jackson Avenue address. We feel burdened, tired, or withdrawn. I have also been reassured, warmed, and energized by how others have made their implicit support and friendship explicit in words, money, and deeds. All these feelings are important. We will need to be compassionate, empathetic, and direct with each other about these feelings.

We retain our identity by being aware of who we are emotionally, offering compassion to others, and being clear in our vulnerability that we wish to engage in dialogue. All these emotional needs can exist together, side-by-side. As Dennis Lehane said: "Happiness lies in the person sitting beside you and your ability to talk to them. Happiness is clearheaded human interaction and empathy. Happiness is home. And home is not a house . . . It is a state of mind. A place of communion and unconditional love." So be it.