

WORDS HURT, WORDS HEAL

Before I preach my sermon on how words can either hurt or heal, I have some general New Year's advice I need to get off my chest. Stuff I've been thinking about and want to pass on to people I cherish, like you folks.

So, in effect, I'm starting the New Year with a mini-sermon or ten simple things to do to energetically launch 2009. I could elaborate on each item, but I'll be real brief, so you can catch the gist of my counsel. You don't have to write them down; my sermons are on our website, starting every Sunday afternoon.

One, begin here.

Two, begin now.

Three, begin as you are.

Four, begin small...or as my friend says: change 5% of your habits or change one of your habits 5%.

Five, begin by doing what you can.

Six, begin with those closest to you.

Seven, begin by turning the page.

Eight, begin by cleaning up your own slate.

Nine, begin by looking for new questions in 2009, not old answers.

Ten, begin to move forward without absolutely predicting where your path may lead.

To summarize, my friends, in order to approach this irrepeatable year of 2009 with both grace and gumption, I exhort you to: want what you have; do what you can; and be who you are, really are.

Okay, now on to my planned sermon on the power of words.

There's the joke about an Iowa preacher's new car breaking down just after the Sunday service. Come Monday morning, the Reverend managed to drive the vehicle to the town's one garage for repairs. "I hope you'll go easy on the cost," he told the mechanic. "After all, I'm just a poor preacher." "I know," came the reply. "I heard you preach yesterday."

Try as we preachers will, some sermons are like the miracle of Mohammed's coffin, suspended between heaven and earth, but actually touching neither.

Yet I, like some of you, make my living as a wordsmith, piecing together the alphabet in order to lift people's spirits. But that wasn't always true for me, since I was unusually reserved as a baby and young child, saying little that was intelligible until I entered kindergarten. But look at me now, still babbling away at 67.

What a blessing merely to possess language! The wondrous power of words to silence or motivate, to harm or heal. And even as some of our beloved elders, in cognitive decline, are surrendering language, there are newbies, like our 2 year-old grandson in Santa Barbara, Zadin, who's prattling away like gangbusters, employing new words by the minute.

Oh, the wonder of words. They echo inside our chambers whenever we're inspired or angry, despairing or joyous. Somehow human experience isn't quite complete,

until we try to frame it in language. And love unspoken, well, it simply fails to reach its destination.

And words can often outlast us. “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here,” spoke Abraham Lincoln in his address at Gettysburg, “but we can never forget what they did here.” Yet more than a century later, when the names of the soldiers who died are mostly forgotten, Lincoln’s words are indeed what are remembered about Gettysburg, and the heroism itself is recalled largely because Lincoln poured his eloquence upon the field of battle.

The second chapter of the Bible recounts that God breathed into the nostrils of human, and it became a “living being.” The early Aramaic translation of that phrase, from 2000 years ago, reads: “Adam was given the spirit of speech.” The very breath of life, you see, pours into us this magic elixir; through language we become living souls.

No group of people that lacks speech has ever been discovered.

Nonetheless, as a religious pilgrim, neither my livelihood nor my life is composed merely of words. My existence readily shrivels without song and silence, touch and action. In truth, deeds are the bottom line of Unitarian Universalism. Our lives are ultimately judged not by our chatter or even our character but by our conduct.

You and I belong to a word-focused, reasonable faith, but we’re scarcely a band of intellectuals. Rather, in the final analysis, we’re called to be truth-doers: people who lug, with our own hands, the necessary timbers to build a more just and joyful world.

But our words count, oh how they count! We’re here on earth primarily to *do* the truth but we can never forget to *speak* the truth as well. We Unitarian Universalists

belong to a distinct legacy of prophets who assailed the social and theological orthodoxies of their day. Both with deeds and words.

In fact, a cornerstone of the eight steps to enlightenment taught by Buddha some 2500 years ago is “right speech.” And in a world of exaggerated advertising, honking road-ragers, hate radio, internet abusers and political spin-doctors—simply a ruder American culture than ever before—right speech is no mean feat. Yet that’s our religious mission: to think deeply, to speak kindly, then to act honorably.

And even when we have something difficult, even harsh, to say to somebody, and we will have those times, won’t we, the key is to speak our truth in love. Jesus in the gospel of Matthew was asked to sum up the 613 laws of Leviticus in the Hebrew scriptures. And he did so by encouraging us to “reprove our neighbor with kindly and gentle intent.” Not to bash or judge our neighbor, but, if we must correct or challenge them, to do so in a spirit of respect and love.

One of our Unitarian Universalist colleagues recently took the five mindfulness precepts of Buddha in a formal ceremony. Cynthia told me that she was devoting her life to the cultivation of deep listening and loving speech in order to bring greater joy to others, starting with her partner and children. She said: “I vow no longer to spread news that I don’t know to be certain and to stop criticizing things of which I’m not sure. I will also refrain from uttering words that might cause discord or spread bitterness. I will aspire to speak all of my truths in love!”

As Gandhi said: we must be the change we wish to see in the world, and it all starts with our words: words that create peace, establish justice, and spread joy. So let me

share but three reminders in our Unitarian Universalist quest to exemplify “right speech”, to use mindful and compassionate language, a key human challenge as we begin 2009.

WORDS CAN HARM

Folks, we live in an “argument culture” where there’s an increasing glorification of aggression in public discourse. Everything in the media nowadays is focused on contention and debate. In a debate, reason is misused in order to defeat the other person. Literally, just look at the origin of the word. *De* is “to the utmost”, *bat* is “beat”. You see it in words like battle and combat.

Debate, in today’s world, is seldom civil and decent; rather it’s a way of proving we’re right, more than finding out what’s right. Yet what we desperately need in our families, congregations, and larger world is more dialogue and less debate. Dialogue is a constructive and instructive way of discovering new ways of seeing. In a dialogue, you have to accept that sometimes you’re wrong, that the other person may be right. Both sides have a chance to change and grow.

And when we scour the landscape of our “argument culture”, we’re likely to locate moments of gossip, unfair rage, and jealous criticism. Almost unknowingly we can spout untruths or misleading half-truths. Our words can harm. So, let’s vow to stop, or at least reduce, our harmful language at home and work, schools and in society, as card-carrying San Dieguitans in 2009 and beyond.

Remember Hippocrates’ cardinal tenet: “First, do no harm.”

I’m giving this sermon right now, because things are quite harmonious around San Dieguito. I like to deliver *proactive* rather than reactive sermons. We’re currently a

civil and decent lot, good for us...but as we move toward making some hard choices amidst a difficult economy, like realizing all our budget requests and selecting your next settled minister, there will be unavoidable friction, and we must remember to use our words carefully and constructively, lest we do harm to the beloved community we aspire to grow. Every word and every decision will matter, within and beyond our walls.

Here's an example, from my former parish in East County. I heard some expressed sentiment belittling our move from Allied Gardens to Santee, because, after all, they're "rednecks" in East County, or "we're entering nothing but a hotbed of bigotry." First off, that blanket assessment is elitist, arrogant, and off-base, since some of Summit's own folks had already chosen intentionally to live there. Second, believe me, for every person who would despise a liberal religious presence moving into Santee, there was another person welcoming our arrival, and that certainly has proven to be the case in their three years of existence there. Thirdly, and most important, if we're going to be true to our religion that affirms the worth and dignity of every person, then we must start resembling it by ceasing to use denigrating labels about anybody.

Unitarian Universalists may be different than other religious folk, but we can never presume to be better. Any "holier than thou" attitude is foreign to our way of being and doing religion. Period.

So, my sisters and brothers, let's dare to be carriers of compassion, leaving our liberal biases and judgments behind. Let's dare to become a North County religion known for its open minds, loving hearts and welcoming hands.

BEWARE OF PROUD WORDS

Unitarian poet Carl Sandburg put it poetically:

Look out how you use proud words. When you let proud words go, it's not easy to call them back. They wear long boots, hard boots...Look out how you use proud words.

In this poetic fragment, Sandburg's delivering a primary lesson for individuals, classes, and nations alike. Note the clash of proud words that occurs in Congress day in and day out. Arrogance pitted against arrogance. Elected officials pursuing not justice but self-righteousness. They aren't the only culprits. All too often, you and I say cruel and destructive things, because it's so much easier to be clever than to be kind, to raise our status by lowering the status of others. But in the long run, smug, nasty words are often the ones that undermine our homes, our communities, our congregations, and global harmony.

Stuck-up words often ride roughshod and aren't easy to be called back. So, the best policy is simply not to send them. When prone to revenge, enter the silence, then walk away. Yes, there's surely a time to bite one's tongue, to leave things unsaid, to participate in what I call a wordfast.

Remember the Holocaust didn't begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler didn't come to power with tanks and guns. It all began with uttering evil words, defaming language, and proud propaganda. Death and life lie in the power of the tongue. Words create worlds. Be careful of the worlds we create, starting at home, in this congregation, and radiating forth from there.

WORDS ARE WORTHY GIFTS

Words not only wound, they can also instruct and inspire. Words capture souls and quicken imaginations; they grant us wings. Being around our grandchildren regularly, I'm reminded of the amazing clout of our adult verbiage; how, whenever we speak to our little ones, we need to make sure that we deliver fair and friendly words, from heart to heart.

Because as children hear words throughout life, they're creating a dictionary of terms of censure as well as terms of comfort—words they will increasingly use on their own.

Indeed, there were five words my dear mother taught me as a young child to sprinkle honestly and honorably throughout the course of my days and nights. They were words that mend, that heal, that give life. Such as: “Thank you. I love you. How are you? I'm sorry. What do you need?” Of course, there are inappropriate times to offer any of these phrases. But almost universally, these five short statements and questions express gratitude, love, and caring—the most important freight any of our words can ever convey.

What if you and I could share the conscious power of words with countless others, even our whole nation? Tens of millions of Americans annually observe “The Great American Smokeout” as well as “Earth Day,” one concerned with eliminating pollution of our bodies, the other with the pollution of our planet. A continental “Speak No Evil” Day could work to eliminate the pollution of our spiritual atmosphere, the realm in which we commune with others.

A rabbi once asked listeners if they could go for 24 hours without saying any unkind words about or to anybody. A minority raised their hands signifying yes, some people laughed, while quite a large number called out “no!”

He then responded: “All of you who can’t answer yes must recognize how serious a problem you have. Because if I asked you to go for 24 hours without drinking liquor, and you said, “I can’t do that; I’d have to tell you that “you’re most likely a practicing alcoholic.” And the same scenario holds with respect to smoking. So, what keeps us from realizing our addiction to the negative use of words?” The rabbi makes a telling point, doesn’t he?

We’ve just launched a fresh year. January 4, 2009, is as good a time as any to begin our vow to speaking no evil (or a minimal amount) on a daily basis; moreover, the time to utter affirmative blessings to ourselves and all whom we meet on life’s path.

A special day may seem silly, but we’ve got to start somewhere and what’s wrong with starting here and now, where we live and move and have our beings. What better way to celebrate this period of renewal, of vitality, of hope, than to speak respectfully with neighbors and strangers, friends and foes, with ourselves and our loved ones.

Who knows? Once we get into the habit of right speech, it might just prove hard to break.

Tom Owen-Towle
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