

Draft

**VOICES OF THE MANY AND OF THE ONE: CIVIL DISCOURSE
IN AN UNCIVIL AGE**

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson

January 30, 2011

Good morning again, everyone. Thank you, Monica, for your music and thanks also to everyone who have helped create this service. And thank you all for being here today.

This week seems like a typical week for discourse in American life. President Obama gave a State of the Union speech on Tuesday that was then dismissed by some, argued by others, and continued online whispers or shouts that he shouldn't be President because he's a foreigner. Commentator Rush Limbaugh continued a tradition of flamboyant speech imitating the Chinese President by delivering a nonsensical sing-song speech and later saying he thought he'd done well to imitate 1 billion people who don't speak English. Countless anonymous posters on blogs and elsewhere chimed in for and against both Obama and Limbaugh. Another news online report about a former governor of Alaska having email released to the public had this news comment response "It must be so depressing being a typical Liberal, Qualifications: Drop out of high school, Go on foodstamps, Go on Welfare, Get on Medicaid..." Responses from self-identified liberals were little better in the politeness department though better in spelling.

And of course two weeks ago we had the tragedy in Tucson when a mentally challenged young man shot, killed and injured people including a federal judge and a Congress-woman.

Meanwhile, people I saw these last two weeks here in the South waved and smiled at each other, talked at checkouts in stores, engaged in conversations without much malice.

There seem to be two very different types of conversation in America. Where do our rights to speak our minds interfere with the health of the larger community? We see this tension being played out as Egypt goes through very painful social change this very day.

This morning I would invite us to begin finding our own way as a liberal religious community to help renew a more civil conversation in America through our own discernment and example.

First, I would remind us that colorful opinion is not new in American society. I read de Tocqueville's commentary about American discourse a few minutes ago. We read of Americans conversing and arguing about all

manner of passionate topics. Some say the government is corrupt; others praise the leaders as 'fathers' of their country. De Tocqueville then goes on to suggest that Americans are seldom happy unless we are holding forth our individual opinions to one and all even if our audience is just ourselves.

We need also to remember this is commentary about the early 1820's. De Tocqueville's visit coincided with the brutal Presidential election of 1828 when Adams and Jackson ran against each other, accused one another of adultery, bigamy, secret Catholic sympathies, and much more. Jackson was accused of being a murderer and Adams was accused of being a liberal New England elitist.

And we think our politics is nasty?

We probably can admit that our discourse in America is not a thing of beauty. It remains volatile and incendiary; it strokes the passions of allies and opponents alike. It does not promote compromise and true dialogue.

A core element of discourse in a society is of course communications. The story I shared this morning in the reading about the Zen monastic and visitor expresses the limits and confusion inherent in communication between people. The Together Time skit about making the peanut butter and jelly sandwich might show how we may wrongly assume that others know what we are saying and trying to convey to them.

What are we religious liberals to do about this national problem? We are a relatively small group of Unitarian Universalists in a university community that affirms free speech and reasoned dialogue. We cannot change the course or nature of national dialogue or heal it from its wounds.

A number of your congregational leaders and I met for a mini-retreat a week ago Saturday to discuss goals and challenges for this coming year. One topic that came up frequently was how to improve communications in the Fellowship. Let me note here that your communications here is far better than many churches around the US. We agreed last Saturday that it could always be better. Improving communications became one of several goals we set as objectives this year.

Communications not only means the tools by which we communicate but also how we do it.

We have many tools: email, internet social networking, and texting, phone, voicemail, and even in person speaking with one another.

How might our UUFC discourse be a shining example of civil discourse in an uncivil time of violence and reactive anger?

Here are several ways we will hopefully find answers together.

First, one of the primary themes of the interim work we do is to come to terms with the past. Most people hear that expression "come to terms with

the past” and they tend to think of conflicts or problems. You have had conflicts and growing pains here at UUFC. So has every other religious group without exception. I am sorry to tell you that you are normal.

After discussion with the UUA and District staff, your board and I have agreed to invite Dr. Helen Bishop here this coming month as a special consultant. Dr. Bishop is a long time UUA consultant and is noted for her straightforward approach in leadership. She will be here to work with all of us to ask us how we have operated in the past at our very best rather than focusing on real or perceived problems. Her tool will be Appreciative Inquiry which is a relatively new approach to communication between people. I asked her what this really meant and this was part of her response **“...what Appreciative Inquiry does - asks people to remember what the best was like, and consider what it would be like to use those resources in the future. People will still be asked to consider where the gaps were, between "how the congregation was at its best" and "how people acted in this particular circumstance." It really does make a difference, however, when it comes to figuring out what people want to do in the future.”**

This approach does not whitewash or ignore conflicts, problems with feelings or communications failings. It does ask us to consider how we handle problems or challenges at our best rather than at our worst.

All of us will be invited to participate in small groups or if needed individual interviews with Dr. Bishop. Those who are no longer at the Fellowship will be invited to also have private interviews. Several have already indicated their willingness to do so. I will tell you up front that Dr. Bishop not only is blunt in her speech but appreciates bluntness in return.

The end result will be a series of recommendations from Dr. Bishop that the whole congregation will see. The Board and others will then begin discernment as to what recommendations will improve our communications and tone of discourse.

Dr. Bishop told us during her first visit that one recommendation would be a so-called “Covenant of Right Relations” that the whole congregation will create together. I will honestly tell you that I get twitchy when I hear the word “right” used as it suggests commandments. Please translate “right” as “wise” “clear” or ‘compassionate’ just to name a few substitutes. That covenant will be a promise we attempt to keep with one another though we know in advance we fail to do well all the time.

Oftentimes such a covenant will include guidelines about best use of language and the tools of communication. For example, we have guidelines

here at UUFC about when and how announcements should be given in a service. There are many other policies that have come to pass over years.

Another best use of language involves email. Here's an example from the Saturday comics cartoon "Between Friends." A woman is sitting at her computer thinking "**wait, Susan...before you send that email...think.**" The second panel has her thinking "**it can be forwarded, manipulated, copied, retrieved, and can come back to haunt you in any untold number of ways.**" In the third panel, she sighs and clicks "Delete". The final panel has her walking away thinking "**it's ok to have an opinion...just not in print.**"

I don't know about you but I tend to use email too much when a better approach would be to call or meet someone. Email protocols in other churches have tended to suggest that email be used primarily to exchange objective and factual information. This includes meetings, calendaring, events, and so on. If we use email to express our opinions in print as the cartoon notes, we need be mindful of how that could be misunderstood in a document that is essentially public.

I hope that the Board will entertain ways to create a fair and reasonable policy on email use that gives us guidelines for civil discourse at all times.

There's one more approach to civil discourse I would propose this morning before our conversation time. We are a religious community and not a debating club. Our religious identity is eclectic and as diverse as the people in this room.

The Dalai Lama has said that dialogue between religions, cultures, and people in general requires the glue of compassion. This means going beyond our rugged individualism to become ever more empathic as to how our thoughts, words and deeds affect not only ourselves but others.

I believe this is one meaning of Dr. King's words this morning "**An individual has not started living until they can rise above the narrow confines of their individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.**"

What does this mean to us as religious descendents of Jesus who spoke of the Good Samaritan who displayed compassion? What might Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg have meant when she tells the story of refusing to give her purse to a bully and deciding that sometimes compassion means setting boundaries and saying "no"?

I will end with this thought. We call ourselves an inclusive welcoming religious faith. We speak of an interconnected web of all existence where no one is separated from the whole.

Therefore, the spiritual DNA that runs through us is connected to those Muslims in Egypt fighting for their freedom, to the Jewish people who struggle to co-exist with Palestinians who hold up their Islamic faith.

That DNA is also Buddhist, Christian, Earth-centered Spirituality, humanist, atheist and so much more.

That DNA has been passed down to us and it is our decision whether to transmit it on to the next generation, to the hundreds of people in this area who seek us but don't know we are here.

We need not try to face the concerns of **all humanity**.

Let us try first in this house we call our spiritual home.

Let us do good work like what Caroline and others are doing with "Comfort the Dying in South Carolina" project.

Let us continue to treat each other with respect even with their flaws and ours, too.

May we speak well and listen even more deeply than we have at our best.